

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

A. Overview

1. Project Team

The San Mateo County 2013 Homeless Census and Survey (the “Census and Survey”) was conducted in January and February 2013. The San Mateo County Human Services Agency’s Center on Homelessness staff were responsible for project planning and implementation. The Center on Homelessness contracted with Kate Bristol Consulting (KBC) and Philliber Research Associates (PRA) for assistance with developing the project methodology, analysis of the data and preparation of the final report.

2. Census and Survey Components

The Census and Survey consisted of two main components:

- **Homeless Census (“the census”)**, a point-in-time count of homeless persons living on the streets, in vehicles, homeless shelters, transitional housing and institutional settings on January 24th, 2013¹; and,
- **Homeless Survey (“the survey”)**, consisting of interviews with a representative sample of 192 unsheltered homeless people conducted over a two-week period between January 28 and February 11, 2013. Homeless people who were interviewed were asked to respond to a one-page questionnaire designed to elicit demographic information (e.g. age, gender, disabilities, veteran status), as well as information about how long and how many times they have been homeless, and their use of benefits and services.

The methodology for each of these components is detailed in the sections that follow.

3. Definition of Homelessness

The Census and Survey used the definition of homelessness established by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act as the basis for determining who to include and exclude:

1. An individual who lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence, and,
2. An individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is:
 - a. A supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill); or

¹ The shelter portion of the Census counted people occupying beds on the night of Jan. 23/early morning of Jan. 24th. The street count portion of the count began at 5:00 a.m. on Jan. 24th and was designed to capture data on people sleeping outdoors or in vehicle on the night of Jan. 23/early morning Jan. 24.

- b. An institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
- c. A public or private place not designated for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

This definition does not include people who are “at-risk” of homelessness (i.e. living in unstable housing situations) or those who are “couch surfing” (i.e. those who “float” from location to location).

B. Homeless Census Methodology

The Homeless Census consisted of two parts:

1. A Street Count, in which teams of enumerators counted homeless people who were visible on the streets, in encampments or in vehicles in the early morning hours of January 24th, 2013;
2. A Shelter Count, in which the organizations operating emergency shelters, transitional housing and other facilities housing homeless people reported on the numbers of individuals housed in their facilities on the night of January 23rd, 2013.

The complete census results are presented in Appendix 2.

1. Street Count Methodology

The Street Count was a “complete coverage” count that enumerated every homeless person visible on the streets, in encampments and in vehicles in every census tract in the county. The count was conducted by teams of volunteers who fanned out across San Mateo County in the early morning hours of January 24th. The volunteers included staff from social service organizations, city and county departments, community members, and homeless “guides.” The guides were homeless individuals with knowledge about locations where homeless people typically sleep. The homeless guides received a \$10 per hour stipend for their work on the census.

The composition of the teams was also designed to maximize local knowledge -- volunteers were recruited from all over the county and team members were assigned to the census tracts with which they were most familiar. Each team included at least one homeless guide familiar with the census tract being counted. For census tracts that included state parks, park rangers served as enumerators.

Beginning three weeks prior to the count, the Center on Homelessness held trainings across the county to prepare volunteers for the count. The training included information about the purpose of the count, a review of the data collection tool and how to use it to record the numbers of people counted, and what to expect on the morning of the count.

On the morning of the count, the volunteers gathered at deployment sites at 5:00 AM for census tract assignments, maps, supplies, and a brief training review. During the enumeration, volunteers surveyed the streets, roads, highways and open spaces of their assigned tracts (either by foot, bike, or car) and recorded their results on tally sheets. Volunteers returned to their deployment sites prior to 9:00 AM. Upon their return, they turned in their census tally forms and were debriefed by the deployment captains to ensure the integrity of the enumeration effort.

Volunteers did not make direct contact with homeless people during the census enumeration. Due to the imperative to conduct a complete count within a narrow time frame and the reluctance of many homeless people to consent to interviews, visual-only enumeration strategies were employed. The homeless people were counted and tallied according to these observed categories:

- Adult (over age 24)
- Youth (age 18 to 24)
- Child (under age 18)
- Age undetermined

These age categories are defined by HUD and represented a new federal data requirement for 2013. Enumerators attempted to determine by visual observation how old the homeless people they encountered appeared to be. They did not ask anyone their age. Age data was also gathered during the Homeless Survey (see Section C, below) and used to supplement the data collected in the visual enumeration.

In prior years HUD did not require people counted on the streets to be assigned an age category. Instead, the Center on Homelessness decided to count people by gender (male, female or gender undetermined). This year the gender categories were replaced with the age categories on the enumerator tally sheets.

Enumerators also noted the household composition of the people they observed, dividing them into single individuals or families with children under age 18. The enumerators did not attempt to count the number of “adults only” households (e.g. more than one adult and no children), since it was not possible to determine by visual enumeration whether two people on the street were a household or just two single people.

The enumerators also counted:

- the number of vehicles (cars, vans, RVs, or campers) that appeared to have homeless people living in them, and,
- the number of homeless encampments they observed.

Due to safety concerns, enumerators did not go inside homeless encampments or look inside vehicles to separately count the people in them. In order to estimate the numbers of people in

vehicles and encampments, multipliers were developed using data from the homeless survey (described in Section C, below), which asked respondents who had lived in vehicles or encampments to indicate the number of people they typically lived with and whether those people were adults or children. These multipliers were then used to estimate the numbers of people living in vehicles and encampments and their household composition. The multipliers used may be found in Appendix 2.

2. Shelter Count Methodology

The Shelter Count component of the Homeless Census was conducted on the night of January 23rd. The Center on Homelessness compiled a comprehensive list of all facilities and programs providing short-term housing and shelter to homeless people. These facilities were divided into four categories:

- Homeless shelters
- Motel voucher programs
- Transitional housing
- Institutions (jails, hospitals, and inpatient alcohol and drug treatment programs)

The majority of programs on the list currently enter data on their clients into the County's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). HUD requires all communities that receive federal homeless assistance funding to create and maintain an HMIS that meets specific standards. This year, San Mateo County used its HMIS database to extract data on the numbers of people in emergency shelters, motel voucher programs, and transitional housing. Using the HMIS was a much more efficient method of gathering the data, and replaced the previous method of conducting a faxed survey of providers. For the very small number of programs that do not participate in the HMIS, the Center on Homelessness staff gathered data using a survey form.

C. Homeless Survey Methodology

In 2007 and 2009 the Center on Homelessness conducted comprehensive surveys of both sheltered and unsheltered homeless people to gather critical information about who is homeless in San Mateo County, why they are homeless, and what they need to end their homelessness. In 2011 and 2013, an abbreviated version of the survey was conducted using a shorter questionnaire. In addition, only unsheltered homeless people were interviewed. There were two main reasons for scaling down the scope of the homeless survey in 2011 and 2013:

- (1) The County's HMIS system is now fully up and running and contains a wealth of data on homeless people living in shelters and transitional housing, so it would have been duplicative to also conduct interviews with this population;
- (2) The 2007 and 2009 surveys were very comprehensive and still provide relatively recent data.

For the 2013 survey, volunteers conducted interviews with a representative sample of 192 unsheltered homeless people using a one-page questionnaire. Over a two week period, about 40 to 50 volunteer surveyors conducted interviews with a sample of unsheltered homeless people.

1. Training and Compensation of Survey Workers

About 80% of the interviewers who conducted the survey were current or formerly homeless people. Evidence from other communities suggests that this approach is most successful, because homeless people are often more comfortable speaking candidly to another homeless person. This approach proved very successful in San Mateo County, where about 40 current and formerly homeless individuals conducted 192 interviews with homeless people living in the streets, cars and other places not meant for human habitation.

All interviewers received training from Center on Homelessness staff on topics including respondent eligibility (i.e. the definition of homelessness), interviewing protocol, prompting for detailed responses, and confidentiality. Homeless interviewers were paid a cash compensation for each completed survey. In addition, it was determined that survey data would be more easily collected if an incentive gift was offered to survey respondents in appreciation for their time and participation, so each respondent also received a cash incentive.

2. Sampling Methodology

Developing a sampling methodology for unsheltered homeless people can be very challenging. Given the difficulty of locating a sufficiently large number of people who were willing to be interviewed, it was not possible to develop either a truly random sampling methodology or a stratified sampling methodology. Instead, PRA developed a “convenience sample” approach, in which respondents were selected based upon their availability and willingness to participate. However, the surveys were distributed throughout the county in proportion to the results of the census. This ensured that there was appropriate representation of people from the different geographic areas of the community.

It should be noted that while the survey results are the product of a non-random survey, and therefore are not scientifically representative of the homeless population, the methodologies used in this survey have been employed in many communities and are approved by HUD as effective methods of obtaining data on the characteristics of homeless people.

3. Data Collection and Analysis Process

The interviews were conducted over a period of about two weeks, beginning on January 28, 2013. During the interview process, the interviewers took care to ensure that respondents felt comfortable, regardless of their location. Respondents were encouraged to be candid in their responses and were informed that these responses would be framed as general findings, would be kept confidential, and would not be traceable to any one individual. Workers were asked to

remain unbiased at all times, make no assumptions or prompts, and ask all questions but allow respondents to skip any question they did not feel comfortable answering.

Overall, the interviewers experienced excellent cooperation from respondents. This was likely influenced by the fact that many of the interviewers had previously been, or are now, fellow members of the homeless community. Another reason for interview cooperation may have been the gift of \$5, which was given to respondents upon the completion of the interview.

In order to avoid potential duplication of respondents, the survey requested respondents' initials and date of birth, so that duplication could be avoided without compromising the respondents' anonymity. Upon completion of the survey effort, an extensive verification process was conducted to eliminate potential duplicates. This process examined respondents' date of birth, initials, gender, ethnicity, length of homelessness, and consistencies in patterns of responses to other questions on the survey.

A total of 192 surveys were completed. The complete results of the survey are presented in Appendix 3. The survey instrument is provided in Appendix 4.

D. Methodology for Annual Estimate of Homeless People

In order to estimate the annual number of people who are homeless in San Mateo County, this report used an "annualization" formula developed by the Corporation for Supportive Housing and approved by HUD.

The formula used incorporates three data elements:

A = Number of Homeless People (Point-In-Time Count). The data source for Element A was the Homeless Census, which found 2,281 homeless people.

B = Number of People Became Homeless Within the Last 7 Days. The data source for Element B was the 2011 Homeless Survey, which found that 6.8% of those surveyed became homeless during the last 7 days. This means that 155.5 people (6.8% of 2,281) became homeless in the last 7 days.

C = Percentage of Homeless People With A Previous Homeless Episode in the Last 12 Months. The data source for Element C was also the 2011 Homeless Survey, which determined that 38.6% of homeless people surveyed had a previous homeless episode in the past 12 months.

The formula used for estimating the annual number of homeless people was:

$$A + [(B*51)*(1-C)]$$

or

$$2,281 + [155.5 * 51] * (1 - 38.6\%) = 6,737$$

E. Methodological Challenges of Counting People in Vehicles

As noted in the body of this report, the 2013 Homeless Census found a much larger number of people living in cars, vans, RVs and encampments than in previous years. The reason for the larger numbers of vehicles and camps is not known, though it may have to do with better information available to enumerators about where to find homeless people. In 2013, the Human Services Agency and its partners recruited a larger number of volunteers than in the past, including many more “homeless guides.” The guides are currently homeless individuals who have first-hand knowledge about the locations where unsheltered homeless people tend to sleep at night. Each guide was assigned to an enumeration team in a location where he or she was familiar. As result, the teams were able to very effectively target particular locations to focus their efforts and were able to locate more homeless people living in vehicles and camps than in previous counts.

It should also be noted that counting certain types of vehicles, particularly RVs, is an inexact process. People sleeping in cars can generally be assumed to be homeless, since cars are not designed as living spaces. RVs, however, are designed to be lived in and provide adequate living facilities provided there are electrical and sewer hookups available. In addition, RVs parked on private property (such as in driveways, etc.) may have occupants who have access to bathroom and kitchen facilities inside a private home. Some people who live year-round in RVs without access to services would consider themselves homeless, while others are more appropriately categorized as precariously housed or living in substandard housing. All these factors make it very difficult for enumerators to decide whether RVs observed on the night of the count actually have homeless occupants.

Over the next year, the County will explore additional methodologies for identifying people who are vehicularly housed (particularly those living in RVs), assessing their need for housing and services, and estimating how many actually meet the definition of homelessness. This project may include outreach, engagement and needs assessment surveys.