Accounting for the Homeless in the 1900 Census

Catherine E. Dixon

*University of South Florida*

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune

**Recommended Citation**


Available at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol16/iss1/14

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sunland Tribune by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
ACCOUNTING FOR THE HOMELESS IN THE 1990 CENSUS

By CATHERINE E. DIXON
Department of Geography
University of Florida

INTRODUCTION

The homeless population has been studied, counted, interviewed, observed, accompanied, photographed, human-interest storied, enumerated, given projective tests, life-history interviewed, and captured on applications and eligibility forms (Bahr 1989). Yet the 1980s witnessed a heightened awareness of the existence and despair of homeless persons in the United States. To date, there has been no agreement among experts as to the actual number of individuals who are homeless. However, they do agree that the levels of homeless persons have risen in numbers unseen since the Great Depression; but how many homeless, how fast they are growing, and where that growth is concentrated are the questions over which debate rages. Estimates of the actual number of homeless persons vary widely from 350,000, the official figure of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), to a high of over 3 million, a figure much preferred by advocates for the homeless and shelter population.

The first U.S. Census was taken in 1790, as provided in the Constitution (Article 1, Section 2), shortly after the nation came into being. The 1790 Census took 18 months to complete and counted 3,929,326 citizens at a total cost of $44,000. The first census enabled the federal government to fairly disburse the debt among the states for the American Revolution and determined which states would gain seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and which areas would lose them. (Morgan 1990).

Excerpts from a paper presented by Catherine E. Dixon at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, 1990, at Toronto, Canada
One aim of the Census Bureau was to count the homeless as part of the 1990 Census, specifically to count select components of the homeless population in two major operations: one, a special nighttime operation (S-Night) and a second that was part of the regular enumeration process, in order to provide demographic, social, and economic data (except for street population) on these select components.

Politically, census counts lead to changes in the composition of the Congress. After each census, states adjust congressional and state legislative districts to keep them roughly in population. The 1990 Census will provide that information, theoretically, for every street in the nation, not just for city blocks in urban areas as in the past. After the 1992 reapportionment, each congressional district will represent about 500,000 to 750,000 people (including the homeless population). The state of Florida is expected to gain 3 congressional seats in the U.S. House of Representatives after the 1990 Census, and may earn a fourth when the final reapportionments are made.

THE CENSUS OF 1990

As stated previously, the goal of the 1990 Census was to count every person in all types of places, including shelters for the homeless, those living on the street and in abandoned or boarded-up buildings.

The components specific to this study are shelters and street sites. These components were identified well before S-Night with the help of local officials. In September 1989, the Census Bureau sent certified letters to the highest elected officials of some 39,000 local governments requesting that they send a list of all shelters with sleeping facilities for the homeless (such as subsidized hotels and motels rooms and any private, public, permanent and temporary locations where the homeless congregate at night) by October 16, 1989. This list along with updated information identified the sites where “Shelter and Street Night Enumeration” (S-Night) was to occur.

The response from the City of Tampa was minimal. They only identified three (3) broad general areas, i.e. along Interstate 275, an area along the Hillsborough River, and the Curtis Hixon Convention Center. See Figure 1. This despite the fact that there are many well-known areas where homeless people congregate in the downtown areas. In addition, the Hillsborough County Complete Count Committee was instrumental in helping to identify S-Night sites in Tampa.
One of their most ambitious tactics was to send out fliers with the local police. Their justification in using police officers was that since the police roam the county, they would have knowledge of sites where the homeless congregate. In fact, the City of Tampa Police Department sits right in the heart of one of the busiest homeless areas in the city. Practically all the major shelters/residences are located within walking distance of the station. By S-Night, none of the fliers had been returned.

**GEOGRAPHICAL BOUNDARIES**

Geographical boundaries were established according to Address Register Areas (ARA). An ARA is a group of blocks defined by a number of variable boundaries. These boundaries are visible or invisible, i.e. streets, political boundaries, power transmission lines, etc. In other words, they are the smallest convenient area which can be bounded. See Figure 2.

**SHELTER CONTACT**

Between January 16, 1990 and January 31, 1990, census staff and the Hillsborough Complete Count Committee identified as many shelters as they could by physically visiting locations. Since Tampa does not have many subsidized units, they specifically concentrated on shelters, looking to identify all the places where people lived in groups, i.e. nursing homes, hospitals, jails, shelters, etc. These were classified as special places. One of the primary concerns during this stage was to maintain the confidentiality of shelters for battered women. For each shelter identified, a Special Place Prelist Record was completed.

**PHASE I-ENUMERATION OF SHELTERS AND SUBSIDIZED UNITS**

The objective of shelter enumeration was to count each person in the pre-identified emergency shelters and hotels and motels used to shelter the homeless on the evening of March 20, 1990 between 6 p.m. and midnight.

**PHASE II-ENUMERATION OF STREET AND COMMERCE PLACES**

Street enumeration occurred on March 21, 1990 of all visible persons at pre-identified sites from 2 a.m. to 4 a.m. Enumeration of commerce places such as abandoned and boarded-up buildings, etc., occurred from 4 a.m. to 8 a.m. on the same date. The certainty that everyone counted during the street enumeration was actually homeless was one difficulty that census staff was concerned with, but was unable to resolve. For the 1990 Census, everyone on the street at the pre-designated sites were counted, except for persons in uniform, such as police, and others engaged in obvious money-making activities or commerce, other than begging or panhandling.

**PHASE III-T-NIGHT ENUMERATION**

Another area identified through the Special Place Group Quarters Address is transient places where some people stay that aren't "home" in the conventional sense: i.e., YMCAs, YWCAs, youth hostels, fairs and carnivals, commercial or public campgrounds and recreational vehicle (RV) parks and campgrounds. Included in this enumeration are migrant workers also. The enumeration took place from April 2-14, 1990.

**S-NIGHT--A FIELD EXPERIENCE**
The count of homeless persons began in shelters on Wednesday 3/20/90 where the homeless could get a sandwich, a census form, and someone to help them fill it out. Those who didn’t want to answer all the questions were simply asked for their age, sex and race -- last resort information. The second half of the count, the street survey, took place on Tuesday 3/21/90. The survey began at 2 a.m. and ended at 8 a.m. On Tuesday night temporary census takers set out -- in groups, forms in hand, flashlights at the ready -- to count everyone in shelters for the homeless, everyone sleeping in parks, living under bridges and in abandoned buildings in the first overnight count of homeless people ever attempted.

My own experience as a census taker was a cool one indeed. The temperatures in West Central Florida dipped into the low 40s on Tuesday night, motivating many of the homeless to head for shelters, and driving others into hiding in abandoned buildings where they stayed out of sight uncounted. Generally, 42 degrees isn’t cold enough to pack out the shelters, but it was cold enough to clear the streets. Since we were advised not to seek out homeless people, it was obvious we missed a lot of people on S-night because of the cold and because there were not enough census takers to cover all the areas.

I was disappointed there was no one on the street during the street survey. The area my partner and I were assigned to canvas is well-known for its homeless population, drug transactions and prostitution. There should have been countless people on the street engaged in all sort of activities on Nebraska Avenue. But all activity was at a standstill on Tuesday morning. The only people visible were census workers and the police.

One difficulty my partner and I faced during the street sweep was simply trying to locate the boundaries on the census area map (ARA). This was especially interesting because both of us have lived in the area for a number of years and had never heard the names of some of the streets listed on the map. We found three of the blocks assigned to us were now commercial sites which were not identified as such on the map and, except for one abandoned building that we were sure was occupied because of the shopping carts and other items behind it, there was no place else where a homeless person could stay. One block was a residential area in which lots were so small and close together, there was little room for the houses to fit let alone for a homeless person to hide. See Figure 3.

**EVEN POLICE DON’T KNOW**

Another interesting point of note was the fact that the blocks we were assigned to were on the west side of Nebraska Avenue—where as I’ve noted it’s predominately residential and large commercial areas (i.e., Ramada Inn, Floriland Mall, church, etc.)—while the homeless population frequent the east side of the street. This area has many abandoned buildings and low-income motels. This was the area that I expected to find homeless people.

For the final phase of the sweep we were assigned to watch a vacant building. The ARA map identified the building as an abandoned Long John Silver Restaurant. The site identified on the area map is now a portion of the parking lot of a shopping plaza. It's comical that another group in my team also searched for the same streets in this area as their southern and eastern boundaries. Since they were not familiar with the area they drove around for a while
searching for the streets. Even the police were unable to offer assistance because they had never heard of the streets either. At our "vacant building" site there was another building under construction which was partially boarded up, so it was substituted for the Long John Silver Restaurant. We watched the building for the time specified but observed no one leaving the building. We determined that the reason we observed no one exiting the building was there may not have been any homeless persons in the building. The building is too exposed and visible. It is a high traffic area and the presence of homeless persons probably would not be tolerated for any length of time by merchants. The final count for the entire group was eight homeless people.

**SUMMARY**

After the 1990 Census is complete, the question remains: How effective was the S-Night count in determining how many homeless people there are and what changes are to be made in the methodology for the count. According to David Totzke of the Tampa District Office (Phone interview 3/27/90) the count went better than anticipated. It was especially significant because, first, it gave legitimate status to this subgroup for the first time. Second, it reinforced the fact that a social problem actually exists and that the homeless are a part of American Society; an important part that needs to be addressed.

It is generally agreed by all that many people would be missed; but given the complexity and enormity of the problem, the Census Bureau did a commendable job in trying to find as many people as possible. Since the 1990 Census only measured selected components of the homeless population and not the dynamics of homelessness, the forthcoming results will have to be measured within this context and not be viewed as a final solution to the homeless problem. Hopefully the final figure will not become a political battering ram between the government and homeless advocates and the original purpose of aiding people become lost. After review and revision of the methodology used, the S-Night count of the 1990 Census will prove to be an important step in finally addressing the homeless problem at large.

**LIST OF REFERENCE**


