



Backgrounder: **Counting Toronto's homeless people**

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Toronto's homeless street count: Round three

How many homeless people live in Toronto: Are there 500? 5,000? Or perhaps even 50,000? On April 19, 2006, more than 1,000 homeless outreach workers and volunteers visited about half of Toronto neighbourhoods for what municipal officials billed as the city's "first-ever" count of homeless people and street needs assessment. The results are expected in late June or early July.

Toronto's homeless count has been mired in controversy from the start. During round one in February of 2005, when the scheme was announced, many experts and advocates warned that the plan was badly flawed. They said that the city couldn't expect accurate numbers or a reliable assessment of the needs of homeless people. Toronto City Council's Committee on Homeless and Socially Isolated Persons urged Council to drop its plans. In response, city officials sought to downplay the count and stress the needs assessment. But City Council voted to approve the count stressing it would have, "as its central organizing goal, the determination of the number of homeless people¹." This confirmed the fear of advocates that politicians plan to use the count to cut already tight homeless funding and programs.

Round two of the street count fight broke out in April of 2006 as survey teams were ordered into the field. Once again, experts and advocates warned that the faulty method would lead to political controversy, without offering a realistic assessment of the number or the needs of the homeless. Shelters that assist women fleeing from violence (abuse and marital breakdown have

¹ Minutes of the Council of the City of Toronto, October 26 to October 31, 2005, 10.20 Community Services Committee Report 7, Clause 6a.

been identified as the second-leading cause of homelessness) joined with others in refusing to participate in the count.

Round three is about to begin. The numbers generated from the street count are expected to be released in late June or early July – and trigger yet another public, political and media storm.

This backgrounder provides answers to questions about Toronto's homeless count of 2006. It identifies ten fundamental concerns:

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 **surveyed only half the neighbourhoods** in the city.
5. Toronto's street count **relied 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 were counted**, even though invisibility is a survival strategy for Toronto's homeless people.
7. The single biggest group of homeless people – the **"hidden homeless" – were deliberately left out** of Toronto's homeless count.
8. Toronto's "needs assessment" **relied on assumptions and voluntary disclosure**, not informed clinical assessments of physical, mental health and other needs.
9. The 2006 homeless count **didn't consider the dozens of previous counts, needs assessments and detailed research studies** on Toronto's homeless population.
10. The flawed methodology, lack of consultation with experts and advocates, and the motion by City Council in October, 2005, all **raise fears that the street count will be used to cut funding** for homeless programs.

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 number²."

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

² 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.

people in that country. A year later, the Reagan administration offered its own estimate of 250,000 to 350,000³.

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 children⁴. Meanwhile, the conservative National Alliance to End Homelessness has estimated that there are 750,000 homeless people⁵.

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"⁶.

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 shelters⁷. 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).

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 count"⁸.

Wild variations in homeless counts also occur in Canada. The October 2004 count in Edmonton found 2,192 homeless people – 1,452 were on the streets and 740 in shelters⁹. On the other side of the Rockies, the March 2005 count in Vancouver found 2,174 homeless people – 1,047 in shelters and 1,127 in the streets¹⁰. Does Edmonton, with a population of 1 million and a relatively severe climate, really have the same number of homeless people as Vancouver, with double the population and much nicer weather?

³ 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

⁴ National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, *Homelessness in the United States and the Human Right to Housing*, January 2004.

⁵ National Alliance to End Homelessness: www.endhomelessness.org.

⁶ Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, *2005 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count*, January 2006.

⁷ New York Department of Homeless Services, www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/statistics/statistics.shtml

⁸ Quoted in *New York Daily News*, April 26, 2006.

⁹ Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, *A Count of Homeless Persons in Edmonton*, October 2004.

¹⁰ Social Planning and Research Council of BC, *Homeless Count 2005*, September 2005.

One additional note: Both showed a big jump. Edmonton has gone from 836 people identified in 1999 to 2,192 in the most recent study. Vancouver has had even more dramatic growth: a 94% increase (from 1,121 in 2002 to 2,174 in 2005). For Vancouver, the biggest jump came from those on the streets, where the numbers grew from 333 to 1,127 – a 238% increase. 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 latest Australian homeless count has come under criticism from the Royal Australian College of Physicians. The official government report puts the number of homeless in Adelaide at 104. However, new research by Dr Katina D’Onise and colleagues Dr Yan Wang and Prof. Robyn McDermott, and presented to the RACP Scientific Congress in May of 2006, estimates the real number of homeless people at 455. Their conclusion: “This study demonstrates an underestimate of primary homeless in Adelaide by at least 300%¹¹.

Concern #1 – Homeless counts generate lots of heat but little light.

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).

Concern #2 – There is no consistent or accepted methodology for street counts.

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

¹¹ Royal Australian College of Physicians media release, *Study shows real level of homelessness in Australia: RACP Congress*, May 10, 2006.

(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.^{12,,}

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

Concern #3 – Toronto’s street count uses the “point-in-time” method, which misrepresents the magnitude and nature of homelessness.

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 shelters¹³.

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)¹⁴. A technical paper prepared for the Toronto Mayor’s Homelessness Action Task Force in 1998 also reviewed homeless prevalence data for Toronto¹⁵.

There are many different ways to count a particular population, such as homeless people. Some researchers have suggested that “capture-recapture” methodology might provide a more accurate number¹⁶. Capture-recapture was developed by ornithologists to give a better count of wildlife. Scientists have proposed this method for a number of difficult-to-count human populations.

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.

¹² National Coalition for the Homeless Fact Sheet #2, *How Many People Experience Homelessness*, June 2005.

¹³ Dennis Culhane et al, *Public Shelter Admission Rates in Philadelphia and New York City*, Housing Policy Debate 5, 2 (1994).

¹⁴ City of Toronto, *Toronto Report Card on Housing and Homelessness*, 2003, p3.

¹⁵ Joseph Springer et al, *A Profile of Toronto’s Homeless Population*, June 22, 1998.

¹⁶ See, for instance, the note by University of Pittsburgh epidemiologist Ronald E. Laporte at www.pitt.edu/~rlaporte/ref1.html.

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*¹⁷, show that deep poverty is growing, especially in the outlying parts of Toronto – including Scarborough and North York. Since poverty is a major pathway to homelessness, the assumption that homeless people will mostly be in the downtown and selected outlying neighbourhoods must be questioned.

Concern #4 – Toronto's street count surveyed only half the neighbourhoods in the city.

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”¹⁸

Concern #5 – Toronto's street count relied on volunteers to make assumptions about the homeless status of those who wouldn't / didn't volunteer to participate.

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.

Concern #6 – Only the “visible” homeless were counted, even though invisibility is a survival strategy for Toronto's homeless people.

The U.S. National Coalition says:

¹⁷ The full report is available at www.unitedwaytoronto.com.

¹⁸ Part 2: Street Needs Assessment, City of Toronto.

“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 situations¹⁹.

“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 friends²⁰. A total of 30,499 tenant households (which adds up to more than 76,000 women, men and children²¹) faced eviction in Toronto in 2005²², 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.

Concern #7 – The single biggest group of homeless people – the “hidden homeless” – were deliberately left out of Toronto’s homeless count.

Assessing the needs of Toronto’s homeless population

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

¹⁹ National Coalition for the Homeless Fact Sheet #2, *How Many People Experience Homelessness*, June 2005.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ Based on an average household size among evicted households of 2.5, according to the 2004 Lapointe study.

²² Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal, 2005 statistics.

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.

Concern #8 – Toronto's "needs assessment" relied on assumptions and voluntary disclosure, not informed clinical assessments of physical, mental health and other needs.

The 2006 count: Latest in a long series

Municipal officials say that the April 19 count is a "first" for Toronto and will create a "baseline" for future analysis. However, there have been dozens of earlier 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.

The most comprehensive review was the Report of the Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force, headed by Dr. Anne Golden. The final report ran to 291 pages and included 105 specific recommendations. Two volumes of technical studies included hundreds of additional pages of statistics and other material. The first recommendation of the Golden Task Force, that Toronto appoint a Homeless Facilitator on a five-year term, was never implemented by City Council. The first 13 recommendations of the Golden Task Force called for improvements to services for the homeless; the next 23 offered recommendations affecting high-risk groups; 14 recommendations covered prevention strategies; 13 recommendations dealt with health issues; 12 recommendations covered supportive housing; and 30 recommendations dealt with affordable housing. Toronto convened a national conference in March of 1999 to launch the recommendations of the Golden Task Force.

The City of Toronto has issued two follow-up reports (in 2000 and 2003) that included statistics and an update on implementation of certain recommendations. Dr. Golden's report recommended an annual target of 2,000 subsidized homes annually in Toronto, and 1,000 supportive housing units. In February, 2005, Toronto City Council adopted its "Streets into Homes" strategy, which cut the annual targets to 500 subsidized homes annually and 500 market-rent units, with no target for new supportive housing.

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*, May 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 August 2004 (first published May 1996), The 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. *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

Concern #9 – The 2006 homeless count didn't consider the dozens of previous counts, needs assessments and detailed research studies on Toronto's homeless population.

Why all the fuss about the numbers?

Experts, advocates and Toronto City Council's Homeless Advisory Committee opposed the street count and needs assessment because:

- there was no consultation with experts or advocates in drawing up the plans; and,
- the plan is based on faulty methodology, and won't produce reliable information for funding or service delivery decisions.

The motion by Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong, adopted by City Council last October, affirmed that the count will be used primarily to determine the number of homeless people in Toronto, even though city officials and advocates warned that the results are expected to undercount the number of homeless people. The motion has led advocates to worry that the count will be used to cut funding and services for the homeless, and to make further cuts in City Council's already reduced targets for new subsidized and supportive housing.

Concern #10 – The flawed methodology, lack of consultation with experts and advocates, and the motion by City Council in October, 2005, all raise fears that the street count will be used to cut funding for homeless programs rather than move towards a comprehensive housing and homelessness strategy.

Since 2006 is a municipal election year, advocates fear that a significant minority of Toronto councillors will attempt to use the numbers, even though they are unreliable, to seek major cuts to current homeless and housing programs. The focus will shift to numbers rather than a community-municipality campaign to identify and implement the solutions to end homelessness.

One measure of the political resistance to housing and homelessness initiatives is the low level of support for new affordable housing in Toronto. As of April 2005, a total of 648 new transitional, supportive and affordable housing units had been completed over the previous six years²³. That compares to the target, set by Dr. Anne Golden and adopted by Toronto City Council in the 1999 Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force of 18,000 subsidized and affordable units (the target adopted by City Council in 1999 was 3,000 units annually). Even more telling, not a single new affordable home had been completed in 29 of Toronto's 44 municipal wards over those six years. And in another four wards, less than 10 new homes were completed.

The City of Toronto spends almost \$150 million annually on homeless shelters, and housing and homelessness supports. The provincial and federal governments give a significant amount to the city, leaving net city spending of about \$55 million²⁴. Advocates are concerned that a low street count number could lead to calls for cuts to the city's shelter system.

Toronto urgently needs a comprehensive housing and homelessness strategy – along with the funding and programs from senior levels of government to properly fund it. The flaws in the city's homeless count, and the political controversy that it will continue to attract, raise fundamental doubts about whether it can help the city to move to a full-fledged strategy.

²³ City of Toronto, *Status of Housing and Shelter Projects*, April 2005.

²⁴ City of Toronto 2006 Operating Budget: Shelter, Housing and Support