2019

Homelessness Count Methodologies Literature Review

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IS COUNTING THE HOMELESS A USEFUL EXERCISE?
ENUMERATION METHODS PAST AND PRESENT:
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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September, 2019

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Abstract

Although the concept of homelessness is not a new phenomenon in the United States, the attempt to quantify the size and scope of the homeless population is a relatively recent development. This review of the literature about homeless count methods provides a brief history of homelessness in the U.S., an account of homeless count efforts, and an overview of the primary methods used since the early 1980s. This review illustrates that no method is capable of providing a comprehensive census or count of the homeless, and all methods have inherent disadvantages that often rely upon flawed assumptions. The practical impact of these counts on policy is substantial. Therefore, this review should encourage discussion as to what data communities need for policy and program development and implementation, and whether homeless counts actually fulfill this need.

Introduction

Contemporary efforts to count the homeless population in the United States have a fraught history that has been constructed over the course of the last four decades. The longstanding, private-public network of homeless services that stemmed from these early counting efforts has created a system that now circulates over $2 billion in federal funds through a nationwide system of nonprofit service providers and local governments (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2019). Many Americans likely assume that this federal funding has created an interconnected network of providers and services that are based upon a vast collection of evidence pointing the way toward ending homelessness[1]. Yet, Americans understand the scope of homelessness and the resources deployed to address the issue primarily through the lens of their local elected officials, media outlets, and service providers – all of whom view this issue through their own experiences, beliefs, and perceptions.

While the federal investment in homeless services is the most significant and irreplaceable, state and local homelessness funding and policy efforts have come to parallel the definitions and guidelines established by the largest federal homelessness funding mechanism, managed through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and known as the Continuum of Care (CoC) program (Willse 2015). To fully understand the patchwork of homeless services as it now exists, it is critical to recognize and appreciate the increasingly central role that data collection has played in framing the homelessness policy narrative. The most important – and contested – of these data collection activities has been the many efforts to try to quantify the size of homeless populations.

This review of the literature on the creation and development of homeless count methods addresses four goals: (1) to clearly document the origins of modern homeless counts, (2) to explain why homeless count results have so often been challenged, (3) to explore the many reasons why homeless counts continue to be central to homelessness policy in the U.S.,

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[1] The terms "homeless" and "homelessness", rather than "houselessness", are used throughout this review because they are what is commonly used in research literature, public policy documents, and media reporting.

and (4) to consider the benefits and disadvantages of the available methodologies. In presenting the history and evolution of homeless counts in the U.S., the greater expectation is for this document to spark the necessary discussion among readers about what purposes homeless counts ultimately serve, and whether they are fulfilling those objectives.

A Brief History of Homelessness in America

This is not intended as a comprehensive history of homelessness in the U.S. But it is useful to the discussion of homeless counts to briefly recount the evolution of homelessness and the distinction between "old" and "new" homelessness. Old homelessness is generally understood to be any phenomena from the early colonial period up to the late-1970s. This enormous timeframe of more than 200 years might seem strange given how much American culture and geography has changed over that time. However, even with the varied responses to homelessness over generations and in different regions of the country, the often consistently and predictably negative responses to "beggars", "vagrants", "hobos", or simply "the homeless" have been an undeniable trend. As the visibility of this population has waxed and waned with social and economic changes, "the homeless" have continued to be viewed as a monolithic population; a population that represents the societal acceptance of a continually underserved and vulnerable people that defy a singular or easy policy response. The only noticeable change over time has been the degree to which homelessness has been visible during different historical periods.

Government provision of relief for the extremely poor and the literal homeless, or those living out-of-doors, has generally been sparse and fickle. In the pre-Colonial and Colonial eras, caring for the poor and those without houses or property was often addressed by local religious and secular leaders. The definition of who would receive assistance, and the conditions under which they were deemed worthy of this assistance, would change over time. The literal lack of a house was only one contributing factor to an overarching identity that was primarily recognized as one which lacked family or community support – something which people of the time perceived as indicative of personal moral failings. Homelessness did not just signal the lack of access to a house, but the inability to connect with the unspoken conception of "home" and a surrounding community.

This apparent lack of connection to a family home made the literal homeless a frightening social problem for early American settlers. The nascent federal government did not have the ability or resources to offer support to those without a physical residence; as a result, support for the poor and homeless was addressed at the local jurisdictional level. But the type of help varied widely, and colonial (and later) state intervention was usually minimal. During the colonial years, people without "settlement rights" (meaning rights to land or property) or transitory migrants were often cast out of one community only to become an issue for another (Rossi 1989), while others were provided small amounts of support by the residents of the jurisdiction they were in. In other communities, churches and secular authorities joined forces to create "almshouses" for the poor and homeless (Hopper and Baumohl 1996). These early shelters often distinguished between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, deeming widows with young children or the elderly and sick as being in need of a full range of shelter and support, while seemingly able-bodied single adults were generally determined to be

undeserving of such support. Those considered able to work would be made to either work in the almshouse itself, or would be rented out to work for others in order to justify their housing and support. Those who were considered neither deserving nor able-bodied would likely be turned out completely (Hopper and Baumohl 1996).

As the 19th century progressed, the characteristics of these needy populations became more diversified, and defied easy categorization into being "worthy" or "unworthy" of community support. During and after the Civil War, this categorization became even more morally complicated and widely inconsistent in practical terms, as more people migrated around the country for a variety of social and economic reasons. In particular, the post-Civil War period coincided with the increase in industrial work in major cities, spurring huge waves of migration and a corresponding surge in migrants from many backgrounds with varied needs (Hopper 1989, Blau 1992, Hopper and Baumohl 1996). Hopper (1989) describes how the homeless in New York City were treated, through detailed records kept by local officials. These records describe the types of "outdoor relief" (or monetary stipends), "indoor relief" (or poorhouses), and exposes the internal debate over whether such supports were engendering laziness and immorality, particularly if there was no work requirement in exchange for relief (19). Additionally, these records show that the needs of the most vulnerable varied based upon weather conditions and economic circumstances. Not unlike a phenomenon familiar to contemporary Americans, shantytowns – akin to modern tent cities – emerged in a range of cities, including New York, Chicago, and Boston. Similar to the responses of some modern policy makers, the officials of the time responded to the development of shantytowns by forcing out the residents and using that land to build other features – in the case of the aforementioned cities, New York's Central Park, Chicago's Grant Park, and Boston's Back Bay neighborhood (Hopper 1989, 20).

Following several recessionary periods and a world war, the rising desperation wrought by the Great Depression briefly spurred the federal government to action over homelessness for the first time. As part of the Roosevelt Administration's New Deal initiatives, a variety of work, housing, and support programs tried to address the increasing visibility of homelessness. Of course, economic downturns can inflict hardship on anyone, and they take no account of age, gender, or physical ability. Yet some sociological studies of the time, and the types of New Deal programs that developed, suggest that there was an intentional sorting of the needy as being worthy or unworthy of government support based upon conceptions harkening back to the pre-Colonial era. The Civilian Conservation Corps, Works Progress Administration, and the short-lived Federal Transient Program (which operated from 1933-1935) were primarily focused on construction projects and often provided on-site temporary housing. But given the nature of the work, only young, physically able men were typically enrolled in these programs (Hopper and Baumohl 1996). Older or sick men (and some women) were usually not accepted into these programs, and continued to seek local assistance. Homeless families, on the other hand, received different types and degrees of services from both local communities and federal programs.

Several social science studies during the 1930s also focused almost exclusively on homeless men. The work of famed University of Chicago sociologist Nels Anderson showed an understanding of the complex personal and socioeconomic factors underlying transient and homeless lives (Hopper 2003). Anderson's in-depth work of interviewing these men led to one of his most well-known works, *The Hobo* (published in 1923), along with a string of other work

with the same populations throughout the 1930s. Yet according to Rossi (1989), Anderson still came to believe that the homeless population of the time was comprised of men who would be permanently unemployed, unable to find any steady work for the duration of their lives partly because of their homeless experiences, as they were considered only "surplus labor" to an economy that did not need them (22). This belief was also somewhat reflected through one of the more detailed studies of the time, conducted by New York psychologist Herman J.P. Schubert. As Rossi describes, for more than a year Schubert collected information about the people who sought aid from the state's Temporary Emergency Relief Act, funded through federal legislation in 1933. The Buffalo (New York) Transient Center, where Schubert meticulously collected his data, found that many of the aid applicants were young (median age of 30), white, male, and single. But he also found that 20 to 30 homeless families that sought assistance each month. These families were allowed to use the shelter for far longer periods than the single adults, who were required to leave after just a few days, regardless of their circumstances. This suggests that there was a very different set of triage and service standards for families than for single individuals, particularly men.

But Schubert's study could not be generalizable beyond Buffalo, as the geography and social and economic circumstances there were quite different from other parts of New York State, particularly New York City, and certainly different from most other parts of the country. Furthermore, given that almost 60% of those who passed through the Buffalo Transient Center said they had arrived by train, it seems likely that these men were actually migrant workers, searching for work in other urban areas but in need of temporary assistance. According to Rossi (1989), Schubert goes on to describe that older transients, usually over the age of 40, were often referred to rural federal transient camps for "discouraged" workers. Yet there is no evidence that families were similarly referred to these outer area camps.

From this account, Rossi concludes that, "Only one homeless category garnered public sympathy – the families in the Dust Bowl states who packed up their meager belongings loaded their dilapidated cars, and drifted westward…Homeless *families* evoked more sympathy than the more usual homeless unattached person" (25, emphasis in original). This subjective determination of the deserving poor over the undeserving is a troubling finding. But whether for single men or families, these assistance offerings were still considered to be short-term, stop gap measures for a condition that was presumed to be temporary. Hopper (2003) argues that public shelters of this era reflected a "philosophy of temporariness" (44) that was intended to offer basic assistance, but to deter long-term dependence, regardless of actual need.

The academic focus on single homeless males continued into the post-World War II era, as "skid rows" developed in the 1950s and 1960s. The men in these neighborhoods were deemed to be homeless by researchers of the time, even though they were not literally so. Skid row neighborhoods in urban areas were those where low-income residents settled because they were detached from family members with whom they could live, and they could afford to live in the hotels and rooming houses on their small incomes. American sociologists referred to these men as homeless for the much same reasons that Colonial era or 19th century Americans did – they were disconnected from family and community (Jencks 1994, Rossi 1989). Apparently of particular interest to researchers was that the men on skid rows appeared to be living their lives in "'social and cultural limbo'" (Groth 1994, as cited in Hopper and Baumohl 1996).

But as the post-war period continued, skid rows became an increasingly thorny issue for cities, who were faced with areas of their cities that appeared rundown and did not produce

the kind of economic returns many leaders wanted or needed. Although too complex a story to fully explore in this review, von Hoffman (2009) extensively discusses the post-war project to redevelop substandard slum housing in skid row areas across the country, ostensibly to the benefit of the poor residents. These efforts led to some skid row residents being moved to new public housing developments. But these were not one-to-one development plans. As a result, many skid row residents saw their low cost buildings demolished, but were not able to find replacement housing that they could afford.

As these redevelopment projects continued through the 1960s and early 1970s, the supply of private sector low cost housing was being deliberately reduced with no federal, state, or local plans for replacing that supply with sufficient public or private options. As the economy worsened through the 1970s, more and more Americans with no housing options began spilling beyond the previously contained skid rows. Many of the poor that had been previously housed began to find themselves literally homeless. The reduction in housing stock, along with factors such as stagnating wages and high unemployment, would serve to make the deepest post-war recession, which began in 1981, into a devastating perfect storm that would lead to what is now referred to as the "new homelessness".

"New Homelessness" Captures National Attention

Blau (1992) argues that what made the new homelessness especially notable was its continued growth during the period of economic expansion in the mid and late 1990s, long after the official end of "Reagan's Recession" in November 1982 (Auxier 2010). Another feature of the new homelessness that seems different from the old homelessness was the inability of local communities and states to adequately shelter even those deemed deserving of assistance. Combined with those considered undeserving, the sheer volume of those needing help far outstripped the ability of state and local governments, churches, or other voluntary community organizations to fully address the increasing visibility of homelessness. While there continues to be debate over the potential causes of homelessness, and how to structure services to target these causes, it became clear that homelessness was overtaking people from backgrounds, ages, genders, and parts of the country not previously seen in noticeable numbers.

Many invoked the longstanding rhetoric that homelessness was due to personal failings or pathologies, and that assistance should only be temporary in order to limit dependence. This understanding may have previously justified minimal government intervention, when there was a belief that changing conditions would again naturally address the issue. But the increasingly visible homelessness on sidewalks and in doorways in many urban and rural communities in the 1980s suggested otherwise. There had been advocates who had promoted more cohesive government responses to homelessness in the past, but this new homelessness was apparently the necessary convergence of events that began to garner substantive political support for such intervention.

Local coalitions for the homeless grew in number across the country in the early 1980s, in cities as varied as New York, Atlanta, Phoenix, Chicago, Denver and Los Angeles (Hopper 2003). Three of the most influential national advocacy organizations, who continue their work today, were founded during this time: the National Coalition for the Homeless, the National Alliance to End Homelessness, and the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. But

perhaps the most recognizable figure among homeless advocates was Mitch Snyder with the Community for Creative Nonviolence (CCNV) in Washington, D.C. Snyder became a one-man advocacy machine in his fight for a permanent emergency shelter in the heart of the nation's capital.

Over the course of about two years, Snyder became famous for protests, such as his weeks-long fasts or throwing animal blood onto government buildings. While he never claimed to be a national advocate for the homeless (Ifill 1990), Snyder's celebrity inevitably made him the default face of homeless advocacy and paved the way for him and CCNV to publish several books on the subject, and made him a popular expert who was often invited to testify at congressional hearings (Hopper 2003). One of Snyder's longest hunger strikes eventually convinced the Reagan administration to convey an abandoned federal building in Washington to CCNV to create a shelter. Snyder was even the subject of a CBS television movie in 1986, with Martin Sheen starring as Snyder (DeParle 1990). But Snyder is also considered to be the origin of the first and most widely circulated estimates of size of the "new" homeless population – estimates which he essentially admitted were largely a fiction.

As Blau (1992) argues, much of the research during Snyder's time focused on seeing homelessness as a collection of characteristics – age, race, gender, job status, and so on – that served to help create or improve direct services. But numbers can also unintentionally serve almost any policy agenda, from obscuring the problems with a particular policy intervention to justifying budget retraction. Numbers can easily be used to frame a cause and the reactions to that cause in any way imaginable. As Deborah Stone (2012) explains, the way a problem or issue is framed not only helps people to understand the world, but assigns responsibility for responses, including inaction. By creating a "causal story" for homelessness as either a result of personal moral failings or as the result of systemic socioeconomic factors vastly changes what kinds of policy interventions are considered – or if intervention is even considered in the first place. Once advocates or policy officials have the opportunity to create the dominant causal story, that story directly impacts who takes responsibility and then frames what, if anything, will be done to address the issue.

If Mitch Snyder fully understood the importance of causal stories and issue framing, he never explicitly said as much; but he certainly understood that his highly public tactics would attract attention and that he was establishing the policy discussion on his terms. In 1980, Snyder and his CCNV colleague Mary Ellen Hombs stated in congressional testimony that their estimate of the national homeless population over the course of a year was between 1.5 and 2.2 million people (Rossi 1989, Blau 1992, Burt 1996). Snyder and Hombs later increased their upper estimate to 3 million people with the publication of their book *Homelessness in America* in 1983 (Blau 1992, Burt 1996). But as Snyder revealed to television host Ted Koppel when he was interviewed for an episode of Koppel's news program, *Nightline*, his seemed to say that his methods had no rhyme or reason:

Everybody demanded it. Everybody said we want a number…We got on the phone, we made a lot of calls, we talked to a lot of people, and we said, "Okay, here are some numbers." They have no meaning, no value.[2]

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[2] Snyder's quote is originally cited in Richard White's, *Rude Awakenings: What the Homeless Crisis Tells Us* (1992), and is in turn cited by Jencks (1994, 2).

There is also some speculation that in addition to making "a lot of calls", Snyder and Hombs simply took another estimate, which theorized that one percent of the population in major metropolitan areas was homeless, and applied that percentage to the national population estimate at the time (Blau 1992, 21). In either case, this estimate was the first and only estimate available for several years and as such, it became the dominant statistic framing the size and scope of American homelessness.

Why Do Homeless Counts Exist at All?

Snyder and Hombs' initial estimates brought national attention to homelessness in a way that had never happened before. In a sense, Snyder and Hombs' specific numbers were almost irrelevant the main objective – to frame homelessness as a big and persistent problem that warranted federal, state, and local intervention. But their estimates also ignited several debates that continue to the present day: Why conduct homeless counts at all? If we conduct them, what are the best methods for counting the homeless? And, what do those counting efforts actually accomplish? As to the first question, Snyder implied that he had little interest in such information, and only tried to come up with some numbers because people asked. Although there are likely many reasons to ask for such information, the most obvious reason to do so is probably to determine the scope of the issue to be addressed, so that appropriate and proportional resources are allocated to address it. Homeless counts may not be the most effective means of accomplishing this goal, but they seem to be the way in which many people want to start to understand this issue.

Following Snyder and Hombs' early estimates, HUD conducted its own effort to estimate the size of the homeless population in 1984, presumably because it was the agency charged with housing issues, and homelessness was being viewed as a housing-adjacent issue. In a widely criticized report explaining its process and results, HUD estimated that between 250,000 to 350,000 people were homeless <u>on a single day</u>. But even having admitted his own lack of rigor, Snyder was one of the most vocal critics of this new estimate. And while HUD's methods were well explained, their parameters seemed as arbitrary as the CCNV methods. Snyder and other advocates could relatively easily critique HUD's methods, as there was no way to compare the methods used to derive the annual CCNV annual estimates with the single-day HUD estimates (Blau 1992, Burt 1996). Furthermore, the low HUD estimate fed the suspicion that the Reagan administration was openly hostile to any kind of federally funded homeless assistance and was seeking to underplay the size of the problem (Blau 1992, 21). Yet aside from a few local attempts at counting the homeless during the 1930s, there was really no other model for how to try to determine the size or characteristics of homeless populations.

Since the dawn of the era of new homelessness, and the initial controversies over the CCNV and HUD estimates, there have been a variety of homeless count methods, as the belief developed that a more accurate count could yield better policy and program decisions. But as the controversies over those two estimates show, having numbers is a potentially powerful means for framing the policy discussion. And the process of getting to those numbers is where the real clashes actually happen. There are three main areas of contention that essentially

prescribe what those numbers will actually represent: homelessness definitions, deciding which methodology to use, and the assumptions underlying any homeless count process.

Definitions

To a large degree, this dearth of information about homeless populations signal the fundamental disagreement over what types of people and conditions should be considered when determining homelessness. In past eras, either lack of shelter or disconnection from community or family ties, or both, could classify someone as homeless. But should friends or family "doubling up" or "couch surfing" in a single dwelling be considered homeless? Does it matter if such doubling up is voluntary or involuntary? If someone's housing or shelter is time limited, are they homeless now or only if they end up sleeping on a park bench? By opening the Pandora's Box on the question of the size and scope of American homelessness, CCNV and HUD sparked the ongoing battle over the "best" or "most complete" count of the homeless. But defining who is considered homeless has varied widely since the early 1980s, and there is still no universally accepted definition. The notion of there being a "best" or "complete" count is ultimately an illogical and unachievable goal.

There was hope that the first federal legislation providing federal funding for homeless services, The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 (later renamed the McKinney-Vento Act by President Clinton), would offer not only funding, but some consistency in who was defined as homeless and ultimately received services. The legislation did provide a definition of who was considered a homeless individual: they lack a "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence", and had a "primary nighttime residence" that is a public or private shelter intended for temporary living, a facility that is intended to provide temporary housing for those soon to be institutionalized (such as a hospital or mental health facility), or a public or private place not "ordinarily" used as a sleeping location for humans (Public Law 100-77).

The original McKinney definition essentially addressed those who were literally homeless (i.e., living on the street), or were in a recognized shelter. But this definition appeared to exclude those that were doubled up with friends or family, those using short term public or private motel/hotel vouchers, or those in institutions, such as criminal justice facilities. Facing a political environment that was not especially hospitable to assisting the homeless, this definition served to reduce the number of people eligible for assistance. Irrespective of political or budgetary limitations, definitions are critical in assisting policy makers to plan relevant and appropriate responses to homelessness (Burt 2001, 6). But as Blau rightly highlights (1992), the definitions of concepts such as "shelter" or "temporary", "...are so sensitive to changes in the political milieu that they have never shown much staying power" (19). This lack of unanimity about what homelessness is or is not makes quantifying the concept all the more difficult and contentious.

It is likely that the fight over homeless population estimates kept advocates motivated to fight for the McKinney Act's passage. But much like the New Deal programs, the McKinney Act was only intended to be a temporary intervention for a presumptively temporary problem. Hence the McKinney Act was expected to sunset after three years, under the mistaken belief that this era of homelessness, like those that came before, would be merely temporary and did

not require anything more than short term emergency intervention from the federal government (Foscarinis 1996). Between the sunset provision and major underfunding of McKinney in the first three years, there was little discussion over changing the homelessness definition, since the focus became simply providing basic services and keeping people alive.

Despite the three year sunset expectation, the McKinney Act continues to live on today, now as the McKinney-Vento Act, and most recently reauthorized by Congress under the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2009 (HEARTH Act). Federal funding through McKinney-Vento programs continues to be the nation's largest source of homeless services funding. No other form of public or private funding could replace the $2 billion in service funding if the McKinney-Vento Act were to disappear. Not surprisingly, the fight over the definition of homelessness continued throughout the lobbying for and passage of the HEARTH Act, because advocates and service providers understood that someone falling outside of the official definitions would be effectively denied access to services.

Currently, the two most frequently used definitions, from HUD and the U.S. Department of Education, still have their critics. But following passage of the HEARTH Act, the HUD definition eventually made its way through various regulatory processes and was finally enacted in January 2012 (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2012). The HUD definition has long been the most contested because it is the main definition that drives most federal, state, and local homelessness policy. Reliance on the HUD definition has been especially problematic primarily because of its focus on the chronically homeless, which are single adults with multiple "episodes" or periods of homelessness. The most recent HEARTH Act changes to the definition now recognize chronically homeless families and youth, but still do not recognize any form of doubling up and do not consider people temporarily living in institutional settings (such as hospitals or jails) to be homeless, even if they will be discharged into homelessness.

The Department of Education (DoE) definition remained unchanged from its 2001 iteration (U.S. Department of Education n.d.) under the HEARTH Act. That definition, used by all publicly funded school districts around the country, requires districts to count and provide services to their homeless students. But it is important to note that the differences between the HUD and DoE definitions have three significant policy consequences: (1) the DoE definition includes those who are doubled up due to economic hardship, (2) the DoE definition therefore may provide a better estimate of those who are doubled up, which is likely to be a far larger number than the chronically homeless estimates alone, and (3) school districts and many HUD funded service providers are unable to provide services to non-student family members in many cases, as they are not students and are still are not considered homeless under HUD's definition.

Clearly, simply establishing a definition does not end the controversy over those who are included and excluded. The battle rages on for those who argue that these narrow definitions limit the scope of policy and program considerations. Under the current HUD definition in particular, many excluded populations simply do not exist as far as the formal homeless service system is concerned. This may keep the official costs of homeless service funding lower, but it certainly does little to resolve the imminent or literal homelessness for people outside of these definitions.

Differing Methods

Researchers such as Burt (1996), Blau (1992), and Rossi (1989) all note the restrictive nature of the original McKinney definition. Even now, there is no allowance for being "at-risk" of homelessness or "imminently" homeless. Only literal homelessness or being in a shelter qualifies someone for assistance in most cases. Although a much more limiting definition than advocates wanted, the seemingly more precise early McKinney definition still provided little insight into how to design a homeless count of street and shelter populations. Clear delineations are important to social science researchers, particularly so others can determine if study results can be consistently reproduced. But neither the McKinney Act nor any regulatory guidance from the federal agencies that administered McKinney programs provided any meaningful help with other methodological parameters, such as:

- What counts as a homeless shelter? Can churches, union halls, or large private homes qualify, even if providing shelter to the homeless is not a primary function?

- Due to changes in need during different seasons (e.g., winter as opposed to summer), is there an ideal time of year to count homeless people?

- Do regional differences, among and within states, and especially between rural and urban conditions, mean that regional comparisons are not possible?

- Where should enumerators go to search?

- How long should a homeless count last? One day, many weeks?

- What timeframe should the final count or estimate cover – one day, one month, one year, or some other period?
- How does one count homeless individuals or families that repeatedly cycle in and out of homelessness during the designated timeframe?

As with definitions, making decisions regarding these kinds of questions necessarily determines the functional parameters of homelessness.

Underlying Assumptions

In addition to the many complications discussed in the previous sections, there is one central problem with any discussion about homeless count definitions and methods – it ignores the underlying assumption that such counts provide useful information. Mitch Snyder's statements about his own estimates suggest he found such information of little use. Thirty years later, Jocoy (2013) directly addresses this missing link in the homeless count discussion. As both an academic researcher who has analyzed homeless count data and someone who has volunteered as a homeless count planner and enumerator, she has had the opportunity to observe these processes from a variety of vantage points.

Jocoy argues that because planning and implementing a homeless count process is so time-consuming, many staff members from state and local jurisdictions, as well as the many volunteers and other community members who see these efforts underway, simply assume that such an involved process must be meaningful. Whether the presumed ends are to improve the chances for more federal homeless services funding, or providing data for better program planning, it is simply taken for granted that these burdensome efforts serve a greater purpose. But Jocoy fears that such unfounded assumptions not only divert critical resources away from where they might be more useful and needed, but that a homeless count, "…generates among well-meaning people, particularly count volunteers, a false sense that they are addressing a problem simply by quantifying it" (398).

Jocoy's concerns are well founded. At the time of her writing in 2013, HUD assigned 26 of 100 points to the grant applications to Continuums of Care (CoC) – the jurisdictions designated to apply for McKinney-Vento homeless services grants – that reported homeless count data, with two points linked specifically to CoCs that had especially high rates of homelessness (Jocoy 2013, 400). As of this writing in 2019, the HUD CoC application gives *only six of 200 points* for conducting a count and submitting the results, and there no longer appears to be a specific set of points for CoCs with high homeless populations (HUD 2019, 57). Given the seemingly small return on investment, CoCs can certainly choose not to conduct a count. But it is also unknown how grant reviewers may subjectively view the absence of count data (apart from the point totals), or the degree to which communities will face public or media backlash for not conducting a count. It is also important to highlight the fact that HUD provides no funding to CoCs to conduct their homeless counts – otherwise known as an unfunded mandate. All of the human and financial resources expended on these efforts are being drawn from other programs and projects that may desperately need those resources. Jocoy is sadly accurate in asserting that many volunteers believe that their efforts are helping to learn more about the homeless residents of their community, which will in turn lead to more funding for the programs to end their literal homelessness. Unfortunately, that perception is erroneous and largely unfounded by HUD's own documents.

The previous sections have only described two of the more well-known and documented efforts to produce an estimate of the size of American homelessness. But there were about one dozen other efforts during the 1980s and 1990s that produced estimates ranging from 250,000 to 2 million people, typically over the course of either one day or one year (Blau 1992, Burt 1996, Burt 2001). Perhaps frustrated with the wide variability in definitions and methods among these earlier efforts, a 2001 congressional directive required CoCs to produce unduplicated counts of their homeless populations if they wanted to receive McKinney-Vento Act funds. CoCs were required to provide these counts to HUD for reporting back to Congress beginning in 2003 or, it was suggested, they risked being disqualified from receiving CoC funding.

The congressional statement on this new homeless count directive states that "'…there has never been an overall review of or comprehensive analysis on the extent of homelessness or how to address it…'"(as cited in Willse 2015, 109). But given the many issues raised in previous sections of this review, it is clear that there is no known process that will establish a definitive figure for the "extent" of homelessness. Furthermore, counting alone cannot provide any information about how to address the needs of homeless individuals. Like Jocoy, Willse (2015) also notes that the belief in the, "'necessariness' of counting goes unquestioned; an

unspecified but taken-for-granted value is accorded the gathering of numbers" (110). But what is this perceived value? As previously discussed, the definitions and enumeration (counting) methods employed can create a wide range of estimates, and there is no information in a single aggregate number that says anything about how to improve the lives of individual homeless people. Ultimately, Willse argues, these numbers serve only to regulate the activities of the homeless service agencies, who may suffer if a CoC's homeless count numbers go up or down in a particular year (Willse 2015, 111).

One final example of how the quantification of the "extent" of homelessness contributes to a false sense of accomplishment comes from a frequent homeless count volunteer in New York named Jake Maguire. Mr. Maguire was the communications director for the 100,000 Homes Campaign, a four-year effort to permanently house the approximately 102,000 chronically homeless people who were counted during the congressionally mandated 2010 nationwide homeless count, now known as the Point-in-Time Count (PITC). Mr. Maguire remembers when hearing the 2010 PITC figure that he thought, "I guess that's how we do it [house all of the chronically homeless in the U.S.]. [laughs] I never questioned it [the PITC number]" (Gonzalez 2019). At the end of the four years, when the campaign participants around the country had actually found 105,000 homes in which to permanently place chronically homeless people, he told National Public Radio reporter Sarah Gonzalez that,

[*Jake Maguire*] "We sort of sat back and said, 'This is great!' We just took care of, you know, 90% of the problem. We're going to see a massive decline in chronic homelessness."

[*Sarah Gonzalez*] "But that didn't happen. The next Point-in-Time showed that chronic homelessness only went down by 20,000. Not by 105,000. So Jake says, 'this Point-in-Time count is clearly missing the big picture...'"

1990 Census S-Night Homeless Count

Following the passage of the McKinney Act in 1987, the U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) was tasked with trying to count the homeless during the regularly scheduled 1990 decennial census. However, this was vastly new territory for the Bureau, which relies on a process based on connections to a physical residence. Bureau researcher Matt Salo (1990) conducted an ethnographic study of homeless individuals in Washington, D. C. and Baltimore in 1988 and 1989 to assist with determining ways to improve the Bureau's ability to find and enumerate homeless people. According to Salo's report, a dress rehearsal for a homeless count in St. Louis in 1988 apparently went poorly, so this study was launched to better understand the characteristics of and movement patterns among homeless individuals, as well as their attitudes toward the Census process and enumerators. This study provided useful information about how men and women responded differently to life on the streets, how race and age impacted attitudes toward the Census, and how life experiences and cultural factors influenced behavior on the streets generally, and interactions with enumerators specifically. Importantly, Salo concluded that, "….it is crucial for successful enumeration to be able to distinguish among the varieties of the homeless whose backgrounds, characteristics, vulnerabilities or skills either

force or enable them to utilize different aspects of the socioeconomic niche into which they have been thrust" (Salo 1990, 21).

Unfortunately, Salo's report and findings were released too late to impact the implementation of the 1990 Census "S-Night", or shelter and street count, during the evening and early morning hours of March 20-21, 1990. The Bureau methodology combined an outdoor count with a shelter count and sent 15,000 enumerators to approximately 22,000 shelters and outdoor sites across the country (Blau 1992). The sites were pre-determined by Bureau staff, in collaboration with local authorities and service providers (Martin, et al. 1997). However, even this extensively planned national process presented a host of methodological problems. The street enumeration took place between 2:00 and 4:00 a.m., and was primarily an observational process, meaning that no sleeping person was awakened, and no screening questions were asked to determine whether a person was actually homeless. Additionally, anyone in a uniform or anyone engaged in what appeared to be "obvious money-making activities" (Martin, et al. 1997, 60) were to be assumed not homeless and were assumed counted as part of the regular residence-based Census count. But as Salo (1990) notes, this money-making activity criterion was highly subjective, and presumed that being in a state of homelessness and earning money were mutually exclusive conditions.

Recalling the highly negative public response of the 1984 HUD homeless count, the Bureau probably suspected that this first initial effort at a coordinated national census of homeless persons would be met with criticism. As a result, the agency commissioned a study that would occur commensurate with the S-Night count, as a means of checking the accuracy and effectiveness of the methodology and process. In this "plant-capture" study, decoys (or "plants") were trained and deployed, and intended to look and behave as homeless people were understood to look and behave. These decoys were sent to a sample of the pre-determined outdoor and shelter sites in five cities across the country (Chicago, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York, and Phoenix), which were selected as being representative of geographic regions of the country. The study's exclusive focus on urban and suburban areas is notable, as there was no similar audit study done in any rural areas. A random sample of sites was selected from each of the five cities and a total of 127 decoys were sent to those sites.

The "capture" portion of the study occurred when enumerators identified and tallied any decoys at their assigned sites. The decoys were trained to neither intentionally approach nor avoid enumerators, but to blend in with the surrounding people and environment. The decoys themselves later filled out a form in the way they believed an enumerator (if they had been found at all) had filled it out for them. These forms were compared with the forms returned by the enumerators. However, the plant-capture method involves a number of assumptions and presumes conditions that are perfectly consistent – a scenario that describes few situations in life, and certainly cannot be assumed when attempting to count a highly mobile and difficult-to-find population. In particular, this method presumes that both the decoys and enumerators are all following their training exactly as intended (Martin, et al. 1997; Hopper 2003). Unfortunately, even the best training leaves much to subjective judgment and chance, such as: how visible the decoys and enumerators are to one another, variations among decoys "overacting" or "underplaying" their roles, and whether the enumerators even had time to visit every site they were assigned in the designated time frame.

Despite the Bureau's extensive efforts to implement a well-planned S-Night count, and even with the flaws inherent to the plant-capture study, the results of the plant-capture study

suggested that substantial numbers of homeless people likely went uncounted, from 47% in New York to as much as 70% in Los Angeles (Blau 1992, 24). Some of the problems stemmed from the S-Night planners not having a full appreciation for the variable nature of outdoor and shelter sites, nor an appreciation for the difficulties in counting such a hard-to-reach population – although Salo's (1990) study addressed many of these issues, and could have been helpful in the planning for the S-Night count if his findings had been available in time. But, many advocates who had participated in the count in an effort to better understand the process still found much to dislike. The final results showed a count of 229,000 homeless individuals nationwide, 179,000 in shelters and 50,000 on the streets (Sommer 2001, 7). The criticism was so intense that the Bureau essentially disowned the results, releasing a statement, "…admitting that '[the census] was not intended to, and did not, produce a count of the homeless population'" (Blau 1992, 24).

The Bureau substantially revised its homeless count process for the 2000 Census, eliminating a separate S-Night count, and instead intensified its efforts to enumerate those living in "unconventional housing". The Bureau expanded the shelter count into a shelter and service location effort, such that services such as soup kitchens and day centers were now included. Additionally, the homeless definition was expanded, more was spent on outreach to service providers, and homeless and formerly homeless informants were hired to assist enumerators to identify hard-to-reach "congregating" sites (Sommer 2001). Due to this increased logistical and methodological effort, the 2000 figures for homeless persons increased 23% over the 1990 estimates. Yet the Bureau again distanced itself from its own work. Initially the Bureau refused to release homelessness estimates by city and state, eventually only releasing shelter counts (but not those for the other service locations) with a statement that said in part, "'…these figures do not constitute and should not be construed as a count of people without conventional housing'" (Hopper 2003, 146).

Current Practice: The Point-in-Time Count

Despite the many definitional and methodological difficulties inherent to homeless counts, the 2001 congressional mandate still stands as current policy. As the federal agency that disburses the largest share of McKinney-Vento Act funding, HUD is the lead agency for the PITC. Since 2003, HUD has regularly released updated logistical and methodological guidance, manuals, and other forms of technical assistance to CoC jurisdictions for conducting their PITC processes. The current methodology manual (HUD 2014) explains that, "PIT counts are a critical source of data on the number and characteristics of people who are homeless in the United States. These data are used to measure homelessness on a local and national level and are published annually" (3).

The manual goes on to explain that these data are also reported to Congress, are available to the public, and are, "…increasingly important as a measure of our local and national progress related to preventing and ending homelessness…"(3). But as previously noted, aggregate state or national estimates have no utility to local service providers, who already know how many clients they are serving, and likely how many more they have to turn away. And to the degree that the state and national estimates trend up or down in any particular year, that information is already many months out-of-date by the time of report

publication, and does nothing to advance policy advocacy or program implementation on the street level.

The current incarnation of the PITC, as reflected in the present methodology manual, is that each CoC must conduct its count during the last ten calendar days of January at least every other year (beginning with 2003, the mandatory count therefore takes place on odd numbered years). Some communities choose to do annual street counts, and HUD requires that CoCs submit their shelter and service provider data from their HUD-mandated Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) every year. But these limiting parameters mean that the PITC data are almost immediately obsolete the day after collection. While illustrating the size and some characteristics of the homeless population on a particular day, at a certain time of year, and under specific environmental conditions, the PITC is not a method designed to show any more than that. Any attempt at extrapolating additional information from PITC data, such as an annual count, is an inappropriate use of these data.

A National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty report (2017) critiquing the PITC highlights many of the problems already discussed in this review, most notably HUD's restrictive definition of homelessness and the systemic undercounting due to variability in enumerator training and behavior and environmental conditions. But one other issue that is specific to HUD's management of the PITC process, rather than a critique of any specific methodology, is the fact that the methodologies vary, not only within and among CoCs, but sometimes HUD changes elements of the approved methods from year to year, making multi-year comparisons essentially meaningless. The HUD PITC methodology manuals over time have explained that one of three methodologies is acceptable: service based counts, observational counts, or a combination of the two. However, every CoC can choose which method to use, and can even change that method for every PITC it conducts, if it chooses to do so. Comparing PITC data in any one CoC from year-to-year is therefore pointless if their methods and procedures change for every PITC. And comparing one CoC to another is impossible if each uses a different method. This methodological variability also makes the aggregate state and national data almost as suspect as Mitch Snyder's and Mary Ellen Hombs' estimates in the 1980s.

An additional complication is introduced when HUD itself decides to change methodological parameters. One example in the National Law Center report is when Rapid Rehousing beds and housing units were reclassified in 2013 from a type of Transitional Housing/Shelter to a form of permanent housing. Permanent housing beds and units are never counted in the PITC, so many communities showed a significant drop in their sheltered population from 2011 to 2013. However, most of that drop was a function of a classification change, and not an actual decline in shelter bed needs (10).

Homeless Count Methodologies

Sociologist Peter H. Rossi (then at the University of Chicago) and Martha R. Burt at the Urban Institute conducted the first and most respected scholarly work surveying and counting the homeless in the early 1980s. As academic researchers, both were well aware of the limitations of social science methods in general, and the specific challenges of working with a hard-to-reach populations such as the homeless. Rossi's 1989 book, *Down and Out in America:*

The Origins of Homelessness, outlined what made addressing homelessness somewhat different from addressing poverty generally, the various potential causes of homelessness based on then-existing research, and the various methods of researching homeless populations, including counting them. In addition to an overview of the CCNV estimates and the controversy over the HUD counting effort in 1984, Rossi also reviews other enumeration methods being used at the time, including Burt's and his own project in Chicago. Their reviews of the primary methods still stand as an accurate summary of the potential methodologies available to researchers today.

As discussed in the earlier section about definitions, the ways in which who qualifies as homeless for the purposes of any research process is the first and most critical decision. In the case of homeless counts specifically, both Rossi (1989) and Burt (1996) note many factors that should be considered in establishing the operative definition of "homeless", such as (but not limited to):

- Should the "precariously housed" or those imminently at risk of losing their housing be included? If not, why not?

- Should greater measures be undertaken to count homeless youth, who are often more difficult to find than adults?

- Should people living in vehicles be included?

- Should people who would otherwise be on the streets or in a shelter be counted if they are temporarily in an institution (jail, hospital, etc.)

- What geographic units should be selected?

- How should geographic units be selected?

- How long should a count last (days, weeks)? If the process lasts many days or weeks, should the numbers be "de-duplicated" (i.e., eliminate people counted more than once)? If eliminating duplicates is desired, how can that be accomplished?

- What should the enumerators be trained to do? Can they approach someone to ask their housing status, or do they have to make assumptions based only on their visual observations? If they can only observe, what characteristics are they looking for?

Most importantly, by making a choice about whether each of these conditions constitutes homelessness, the research designers are also fundamentally making a critical decision for policy makers and service providers about who is or is not considered homeless. Certainly anyone is free to ignore the definition used in a particular study or circumstance, but is that likely, given that doing so would necessitate the development of another study with an alternative definition? Additionally, there are clear policy and program limitations that may incentivize the use of a certain definition.

Resource constraints are the most obvious limitation restricting the scope of a definition. Limiting a homeless count definition to only a certain subcategory of the homeless population (such as the chronically homeless), who are found in some locations and not others, necessarily restricts who is likely to qualify for assistance. Such limitations are, of course, always part of policy and program development discussions. But having the definitional decision made during the research process unavoidably forecloses policy or program options that might have been available under a different definition.

What follows is an overview of the five most commonly employed homeless count methodologies:

Key Informant Estimation

This method is one that has largely fallen out of favor, but was one of the few available options during the rise of the new homelessness in the 1980s. This method does not involve any direct observation, interviews, or enumeration of actual homeless people. Instead, researchers interview key informants or subject matter experts, typically service provider staff members, to determine an estimate. Both the CCNV and 1984 HUD estimates used this methodology. According to Rossi (1989), there were also several state agencies that used similar methods to try to generate homelessness estimates during the 1980s.

What the debates over the accuracy of the CCNV and HUD counts demonstrate, however, is that this method requires reliance on a number of highly suspect assumptions. The primary assumption is that service providers have such extensive knowledge of their client base that they can extrapolate state and/or national estimates from their own experience. This assumption is clearly problematic, as service need is known to vary widely based upon geographic differences, changes in weather and seasons, and the urban or rural nature of a community being among most obvious factors that impact demand for services. Further, many agencies specialize in different client profiles, which could also defy generalizability to a larger estimate. For example, interviewing the staff of a domestic violence shelter that accepts women and their children under the age of 10 will have vastly different professional experiences than Salvation Army staff that runs a shelter only for single men.

Partial Count

Rossi (1989) describes a partial homeless count as one in which enumeration or surveys are conducted with a conveniently available homeless population, usually with those seeking services, such as at soup kitchens or shelters. Although this would seem to be a more direct form of count because it directly involves the populations at issue, the quality of this kind of convenience sampling approach can be just as variable as the key informant estimation. The 1990 Census S-Night count included this type of method as a component of the overall methodology. But much depends upon how the study is designed, what defines a homeless service organization, and what kinds of services are included in the study. Additionally, a common limitation of a service based count is the inability to include people who choose not to seek services at all (Berry 2007).

One of the largest studies of this type is Burt, et al.'s (2001) evaluation of the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC) data, which was collected in 1996. Although the survey implementation and data collection were conducted by the Census Bureau, Burt and the Urban Institute research team were integral to the design process and conducted the data analysis. The design of the NSHAPC was based upon a smaller 1987 study that Burt and Barbara Cohen previously conducted for the Urban Institute. In that study, Burt and Cohen found that most of the people interviewed and who had identified themselves as

unsheltered said that they used or visited one service provider at least once a week (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2017). Service use data was collected from 6,307 different service locations across 76 "metropolitan statistical areas" (Census designated units) from across the country that were a mixture of urban, suburban, and rural communities. The research team conducted interviews with over 10,000 service provider staff members and homeless clients, and collected almost 5,700 mailed survey questionnaires.

The NSHAPC results are still cited, even though the data itself are fairly outdated, primarily because the study design has not been questioned. While some may not agree with the parameters and definitions Burt and her colleagues used, the research for this review found no critiques of that study's design or conclusions. In fact, as Lee, Tyler, and Wright (2010) note, the NSHAPC estimates were not substantially different from those of the 2008 PITC about a decade later. Although this particular study does not include any street count data, the fact that many unsheltered people from the 1987 study admitted to using services at least once a week suggests that a longer term service based count, with appropriate methods for de-duplicating the data, could serve as a methodologically sound homeless count approach. Furthermore, the NSHAPC method is far better suited to extrapolation to weekly, monthly, and annual estimates; whereas the PITC is only valid for a single day, during a certain time of year, and under specific environmental conditions.

Annual Extrapolation from Partial Count

Rossi (1989) labels annual extrapolations from partial counts as "heroic", largely because the parameters for a partial count are usually already suspect (56). Accordingly, any flaws in the underlying partial count would exponentially multiply any flaws into a larger and highly questionable annual number. The NSHAPC study analysis was able to produce an annual estimate because there were data from multiple timeframes during the study year, and a procedure was developed to address client duplication. Yet according to Rossi (1989), early 1980s extrapolations were mostly based upon street and shelter enumerations that were simply converted into a ratio of street-to-shelter numbers. A formula using that ratio, coming from a single point in time, would then be applied across an entire year. However, Rossi rightfully argues that this practice assumes that the street-to-shelter ratio remains constant throughout the year. But even in the early 1980s, service provider data seemed to show wide seasonal variations in service use, meaning that such ratios – and the annual estimates produced from them – were likely quite inaccurate.

There is currently one widely accepted formula used by some communities to extrapolate an annual number from their PITC estimates. This formula, developed by Burt and Wilkins (2005) is described as being specifically for use to plan for the appropriate amount of permanent supportive housing (PSH) that needs to be acquired or built. Burt and Wilkins are quite careful to state that the formula is only as useful as the numbers fed into it, affirming that, "Projecting is easy but getting the baseline right is hard. First you have to get your PIT count right, after which you *may* be able to estimate annual numbers" (3, emphasis in original). Their brief white paper goes on to briefly explain how to acquire the best PITC estimates, and then how to apply their formula. While the short section about conducting a high quality count is not new information (it draws from the HUD PITC methodology manual of the time) Burt and Wilkins clearly felt it necessary to reiterate the importance of quality baseline numbers, since

they were well aware of the consequences of applying the extrapolation formula to poorly derived PITC figures.

The most interesting aspect of the Burt and Wilkins annualizing formula is the fact that it is expressly intended for use to determine PSH need. PSH housing units are only intended for use by the chronically homeless. In this regard, the authors are implicitly acknowledging that this annualizing formula (and its underlying baseline numbers) only accounts for one type of homelessness profile, as the HUD definition (then and now) is quite specific about the conditions that qualify someone as chronically homeless. Although this definition has since been expanded to include families, at the time Burt and Wilkins published their paper for their sponsor, the Corporation for Supportive Housing, the chronically homeless definition could only include single adult men and women.

Observation Censuses

Observational censuses are probably the most commonly recognized homeless count approach. As with the decennial U.S. Census, such an effort implies that every single homeless person that can be found will be counted. But unlike the U.S. Census, which is based upon finding people at known and fixed residential locations, an observational homeless count involves a significant amount of preparation to try to find all of the places where homeless people are likely to be found. Also, the U.S. Census process does not only count certain people, as it is intended to count every person who can be found, with no definitional limitations. As previously discussed, homeless counts can only count people meeting certain criteria. It is this selective count feature that makes observational counts so difficult to plan – how can enumerators be trained to identify the "correct" homeless people if they are unable directly ask them about their status?

The most commonly used form of an observational count is usually done in a single day and is known as a point or period prevalence study. This is the concept that gives the HUD Point-in-Time Count its official moniker. In this regard, calling an observational count a "census" is, technically speaking, more aspiration than reality since there is no legitimate expectation that every single homeless person will be found. As Cowan, Breakey, and Fischer (1988) found, this one day snapshot has limited utility, since so many characteristics among a community's homeless population can change over the course of a year. Furthermore, attempting to audit these point prevalence studies through the use of plant-capture approaches suggest significant weaknesses that are simply inherent to the any homeless count process.

A number of studies have engaged or studied the effectiveness of observational homeless counts, with the intent of overcoming their logistical and methodological limitations. Plant-capture studies appear to be one of the more popular methods for both auditing the process itself, and as the means through which to make statistical adjustments to the final estimates. Martin, et al.'s (1997) previously discussed review of the plant-capture process during the 1990 S-Night count is one of the earlier examples. They concluded that the plant-capture method employed during the S-Count "holds promise" for estimating difficult to find populations, such as homeless persons. However, for the remainder of that same paragraph, the authors list the many exacting conditions needed for the method to work

effectively and the many conditions outside of planners' control that could counteract these conditions. In this way, the authors seem to argue against their own conclusion (71).

Hopper, et al. (2008) engaged two methods in an effort to improve the accuracy of the New York City observational homeless count process. The plant-capture method was used as a means of providing a valid method for making statistical adjustments to the estimates, particularly the predicted undercount of homeless on the day of the count. But use of a secondary method, a survey of service users, suggests that the plant-capture method may have too many variables due to human judgment and error to be effective for either data quality control or statistical adjustment. It appeared that enumerators may have modified their actions (perhaps mostly unintentionally) knowing that a quality control study was in progress. Further, many enumerators apparently "discounted" many plants. In other words, enumerators used visual clues to determine that the decoy volunteers were not homeless, and so did not include them in their counts (1440). Additionally, the service site interviews revealed that some actual homeless clients suspected they had not been counted. One reported having seen an enumeration team, but it never came close enough to be likely to see and count him. Others indicated they had been in locations on the night of the count (such as abandoned buildings) where no enumeration teams were seen, nor expected to venture.

Berry (2007) identifies many of the limitations to homeless counts in general (e.g., definitional disagreement and constraints of service location surveys), and observational counts in particular. He comments on the inability to confirm homelessness status through direct communication, which is often too time-consuming given the typical one-day time constraint. In response, Berry designed an observational count in a section of Toronto, Canada in which enumeration teams pilot tested two different plant-capture observational techniques. One team walked a small area, while the other drove through a larger area, each following a prescribed route.

Each enumeration team conducted their count twice during daylight hours, which is contrary to the typical focus on single, late night/early morning hours enumeration used in many PIT counts. The available daylight allowed the enumerators to see who they were counting. Although this would not necessarily eliminate double-counting someone, it would be less likely, unless people had changed their clothes and hairstyles over a four to six hour period. Berry admits that this approach cannot solve all of the methodological problems with an observational count, but concludes that using one or both of these canvassing approaches can be useful in combination with other methods (such as service site surveys), and that these alternative approaches could overcome some of the enumerator training and environmental variable problems that are common limitations of observational counts.

Troisi, et al. (2015) describe their efforts to improve the accuracy of the Houston/Harris County, Texas PITC. Their study evolved over the course of three years, which was possible because this particular CoC conducts an annual count. The researchers, in partnership with the many local government and community agencies usually involved in the PITC, developed a multi-stage process that did not materially impact the methodology of their observational count, but instead focused on logistical changes that could improve efficiency and effectiveness. A plant-capture method was incorporated for two of the three years of the project as a means to make statistical adjustments for the anticipated undercount. However, it was dropped during the third year because they found that the training variances and

subjective judgments of the enumerators created too much data inconsistency, and there was a general confusion about the role of the planted decoys and how to count them (491, 495).

Despite Berry's (2007) relatively positive belief that appropriate enumerator training and strict logistical planning can overcome many of the issues identified in these plant-capture studies, there is ultimately no amount of training or quality control studies that can completely control for the vagaries of human behavior. The ubiquity of observational methodologies is unlikely to change, but communities will need to understand that there will always be trade-offs that communities will have to accept with any homeless count method. There must simply be acceptance that there can never be a perfectly accurate count of the homeless, and that such efforts will always produce estimates, not definitive figures. Or, as Burt (2001) frames this problem, "…it is very difficult to find most homeless people if you only give yourselves one day to do it" (25).

Adaptations of Standard Sampling Designs

Rossi (1989) argues that because homeless counts cannot rely on random or unbiased samples from residential or other fixed locations, the alternative is to alter this standard method. He states that drawing an unbiased sample of "nondwellings", or identifying the locations where the homeless (as defined for a particular study) can be found, is therefore the primary option. Perhaps not surprisingly, Rossi uses the 1986 Chicago Homeless Study, which he led, as an example of such an approach. That study was not intended primarily as a count, and instead each potentially homeless person was interviewed; hence this study easily overcame the inherent problem of observational studies. But Rossi's team's sampling method is worth attention because this study sampled a combination of a street and shelter homeless persons. In the case of the sheltered population, a sample of shelters was drawn from the total universe of known shelters in Chicago, using local lists and expert informants. Then the number of actual people interviewed was determined by probability, as a proportion relative to the size of that shelter. Rossi states that overall, about one in every three people encountered was interviewed (Rossi 1989, 59).

The Chicago study surveyed street homeless people using Census defined areas, and interviewers used a set of screening questions to determine if the potential respondent was homeless, as defined in the study methodology. To try to locate homeless people in difficult to find locations, the interviewer teams sought advice and assistance from local informants, such as security guards. The teams also tried searching in a variety of locations where homeless people might try to find cover for the night (doorways, dumpsters, parked vehicles, etc.). Each interview team was accompanied by an off-duty police officer. Each interviewee was paid a small stipend for their participation, or $1 if they were screened but deemed ineligible to participate. The study was initially planned to take place during one period in the winter, summer, and fall. However, due to limited financing, only the fall and winter surveys were ultimately conducted.

Many of the features of the Chicago Homeless Study are now considered by HUD to be acceptable PITC methods (HUD 2014). HUD only requires a total count of the homeless and those in several subcategories (e.g., youth, families, chronically homeless, etc.) as a condition of

homeless services funding. But since the PITC is an unfunded mandate, and communities must use their own resources to fund the process, many have decided to use it to also take surveys of those they encounter in shelters and on the streets, much as Rossi and his colleagues did for the Chicago study. Since the aggregate count data alone cannot really inform program or policy decisions, these surveys are used as an opportunity to ask questions that can help with this local decision making, while also gathering the data that HUD requires. For communities with the goal of collecting information beyond the HUD required data, a combination of methods similar to the Chicago study can overcome many of the limitations of a single method. For example, an observational count as described in Berry (2007) could also be combined with a more extensive survey process similar to that used in the Chicago study, and still be considered an acceptable PITC methodology by HUD.

Another possible alternative approach is the use of phone surveys. In the first two decades of the "new homelessness", landline phones existed in almost every household. As a result, phone surveys could be used to select a random and unbiased sample. Any or all members of a household could be interviewed to determine household estimates of homelessness histories and rates of those doubled up in a single dwelling. Link, et al. (1994) used such a method to determine five year and lifetime rates of homelessness. Link and colleagues acknowledge that their method excluded any literally homeless people, most of whom would not have had a consistent location from which to place or receive phone calls at the time, except for payphones or through service agencies that provided this service. Furthermore, since their selection process only included households, their method also excluded people in institutions, such as hospitals and jails.

However, the most critical downside of a phone survey today is the fact that mobile phone ownership is very high, and no longer correlated with a specific location. Further, the modern portability of phone numbers means that sampling by area code no longer guarantees that a potential respondent is in the location a researcher is trying to sample, making a random and unbiased sample highly problematic. On the other hand, the relatively cheap cost and accessibility of mobile phones has allowed many homeless people to own a phone, which could factor into the ability to somehow use a phone survey to access people that Link and colleagues were unable to interview in the 1990s.

But, for the conditions of the time, Link, et al. could reasonably argue in their conclusions that their methodology overcame the limitation of point prevalence (i.e., point in time) studies by asking about homelessness experience over many years. Of course the main limitation to this and any other survey process is the reliance on accurate and truthful responses. In this case, it is probably less likely that respondents would have deliberately lied, but the need to quantify periods of homelessness over the previous five years, let alone an entire lifetime, might have stretched the limits of people's memories. They may not have been deliberately deceitful, but the accuracy of the respondents' memories can certainly call into question the final estimates generated from the data in that study.

A more contemporary study that incorporates a landline phone survey suggests how such a method could still elicit some useful data. Agans, et al. (2014) describes how a landline phone survey was used to supplement the 2009 and 2011 Los Angeles County homeless counts as a means of trying to estimate the doubled up population. This study used a network or multiplicity sampling approach. In practical terms, this meant that, using a marketing company list of addresses and phone numbers, the researchers selected neighborhoods based upon

income information associated with the marketing list, publicly available data, and other sources that could predict "hidden homelessness", defined in this study, "…as those who live among, but not directly with, the residential population of a community" (218). Then, through phone surveys, respondents were asked to estimate the number of hidden homeless in the neighboring households. In some cases, research team members were sent out to locations for which the respondents' calculation of the number of neighboring residences did not match other publicly available information.

For the reasons noted above, a landline phone survey is no longer an option, but the Agans study suggests an alternative. Although this study was completely dependent upon a landline phone survey, the network sampling method used could instead be implemented through an in-person interview model. The same neighborhood selection methods using marketing lists and publicly available information is still available and could still be used. Furthermore, this native neighborhood knowledge base is far more likely to be useful in finding the hidden homeless than any of the other more conventional homeless count methods.

Supplemental Method: Ethnographies

Although not a method suitable for conducting homeless counts, ethnographic research methods deserve special attention for their ability to provide more insight into the attitudes and behaviors of homeless populations. Unlike a more structured survey interview, ethnographers visit the areas where their intended subjects live or work, and generally undertake extended and unstructured conversations with them, without any specific interview guide or list of questions. In addition to the previously discussed Salo (1990) study prior to the 1990 S-Night count, Hopper's (2003) ethnographic study during the 1990 S-Night count was specifically designed to discern the, "…mobility, rules of conduct, and textures of life…" (133) among the homeless being counted, with the intent to determine how that information might better inform future enumeration processes.

Not unlike some of the observations and recommendations made by Salo, Hopper found that norms of behavior, relationships among those in the same areas (regardless of biological or marital relationships), ethnicity, gender, and support/complicity or animosity of non-homeless people (police, security guards, bystanders, etc.) had significant implications for the S-Night count. Hopper and his team noticed that the pre-identified sites had simply been treated in the same way as residential addresses, with no additional instructions on how to approach these areas or where to look for people. Additionally, many of the non-homeless poor who were in the same areas as those considered homeless were found to be suspicious of the process and were not subjected to any screener questions to determine their actual status. This lack of understanding of the area norms of behavior were clearly a barrier to full participation by those in the pre-identified locations.

The Glasser, Hirsch, and Chan (2013) study appears to be a study similar to Salo's, except during the 2010 Census. There was no specific S-Night effort during the 2010 process, but this study was designed to find out what types of enumeration would yield the, "most complete and accurate count of homeless populations" (2). This study used a combination of ethnographic and standard semi-structured interview methods. However, an interesting additional feature of this study was the focus groups with homeless people following the main

study period, used to elicit feedback about the Census process. The recommendations in this report mirror those in Salo (1990) and Hopper (2003): greater outreach beforehand to homeless service providers and homeless populations, consistent training and procedures for enumerators, and further research into methods to find doubled up populations.

Some public health studies have also used methods that are somewhat akin to ethnographies, in order to garner detailed information about their subjects. Just one example is the Brown, et al. (2016) study of "life course experiences" of homeless adults 50 years of age or older. These data were collected as part of the enrollment and baseline interviews with 350 participants of the Health Outcomes in People Experiencing Homelessness in Older Middle agE (HOPE HOME) study in Oakland, California. The enrollment interviews took place in various places frequented by the targeted population, with the second baseline interviews taking place at a local community center. Because the intent was to study the potential differential impacts of homelessness on younger and older people, the interviews were long and covered a wide range of memories and timelines, so participant recall is the most significant limitation of this study. However, the benefits of this kind of in-depth research are undeniable. Smaller, more intensive studies and ethnographies are far better able to provide insights into ways to adjust research methods and design than are large observational counts or surveys.

Who Are the Hidden Homeless?

As with all other definitions relating to the identification of homeless people, there is no universally understood definition of the "hidden homeless". There are several terms that can be used, but all have a different meaning depending upon the context. As noted in the discussion of the Agans, et al. (2014) study, their definition of hidden homelessness meant, "those who live among, but not directly with, the residential population of a community" (218). This could include anyone not in a shelter and sleeping in a mostly hidden outdoor location, such as a garage, back porch, tool shed, or vehicle. This definition is different from the definition HUD used at the time for people deemed "precariously housed" or "at risk of literal homelessness", which included those living doubled up (or "couch surfing") in a single residence with extended family, friends, or acquaintances due to lack of economic means to live independently. Another definition of hidden homelessness used by Rossi (1989), Salo (1990), and Glasser, Hirsch, and Chan (2014), are people who are literally homeless, but difficult to find – meaning hidden from enumerators. Burt (1996), on the other hand, uses the terms "precariously housed" and "doubled up" as synonyms. While defining which population is being discussed is critical when designing a research study, as a practical matter, all types of hidden homelessness are of interest to scholars, advocates, and service providers.

However, because HUD does not allow inclusion of the doubled up homeless to be included in the PITC, many communities choose not to add this type of hidden homelessness into their PITC process. Interestingly, due to the outsized influence of HUD on how homelessness is defined and therefore counted, some communities that previously counted their doubled up populations in an effort to better inform local policy and program decisions have elected to discontinue the practice. While the Agans, et al. (2014) study shows that Los Angeles County attempted to count the doubled up population at least through its 2011 PITC,

the recently released 2019 LA County PITC gives no indication that this population is still included in the PITC process (Wright 2019). Similarly, San Francisco chose to exclude doubled up populations from its count for the first time in 2019, in an effort to be more consistent with the surrounding communities that only include people defined as homeless under the HUD PITC definition. The director of the city's Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that, "The methodology for doing these counts gets super confusing, and most people want to compare us to other communities. So using our own definition is just not helpful" (Fagan 2019).

Despite this retrenchment in seeking doubled up estimates in some communities, others are expanding their efforts to broaden their homeless population estimates. Two recent studies provide an interesting new potential method for estimating doubled up/precariously housed populations. The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (2016) used a combination of Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) data and homeless client service use data from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to estimate Chicago's doubled up population. This analysis used the PITC homeless definition and expanded it to include, "those who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals" (3).

This Chicago study used ACS data that identifies those doubled up as any "additional adult in the household who was not the head of household or their spouse or partner" (4), although there is no indication as to whether this status resulted from economic hardship. The researchers then requested unduplicated HMIS data from homeless service providers and identified records that showed whether the individual or family unit had lived with friends or family at any time during the calendar year they were served by a shelter. An unduplicated estimate was created by adding the number of doubled up individuals from the ACS analysis to the number of people served in the homeless service system, but not including those who said they had also lived in a doubled up situation during the year.

This Chicago homeless count process did not include any PITC or other observational count data. But it did not need to do so, as the intent of this study was to estimate the number of people not visible during an observational count. The main benefit with this approach is the methodological consistency the ACS and HMIS data, and the relevance to the doubled up definition being used. A similar study in Nashville in 2018 used just ACS data to create a doubled up estimate in that city, and compared those estimates with PITC data (Richard, Rule, and Glendening 2019). However, it is not clear why the Nashville researchers chose not to also seek out HMIS data and combine that information with ACS estimates.

Policy Implications

Given the history and methods described in this review, it can be argued that homeless count efforts are little more than an expensive theatrical production. It is true that the largest of these processes, the HUD PITC, successfully mobilizes thousands of like-minded and supportive people to seek out the homeless residents of their communities in a presumed effort to help them. But in the policy domain, homeless count estimates appear to be of

dubious value. Due to methodological inconsistencies and the regional and seasonal variations that impact service use and available outdoor congregating locations, any aggregated estimates are essentially useless for state or national policy making – except to say that the problem is large, not temporary, and requires government intervention. In this regard, Mitch Snyder's estimation "method" is as valid as any of the other methods discussed in this review.

Adjusting homeless count methods and logistics to try to find more literally homeless people is not particularly controversial; it is just a more resource intensive endeavor. However, the inclusion or exclusion of the doubled up population is highly contested, since including an estimate of the doubled up in the HUD definition would expand the scope of homelessness and the potential draw on service systems to an exponential degree. The political debate over this expansion necessarily influences how and when the policy development and implementation eventually occurs. Accordingly, the way in which this debate unfolds can be a matter of literal life and death for homeless people. By adhering strictly to the HUD definition, many communities are making a choice to explicitly focus policy and program development primarily on the chronically homeless, to the exclusion of other vulnerable populations.

Other than the researchers who expend significant effort to carefully discuss the implications of definitional and methodological parameters, there is often little discussion among many of the articles discussed in this review about the implied focus on the chronically homeless. This omission could have serious ramifications for those homeless people that seek services, as policies and programs designed for the chronically homeless – who are generally single adults who have had a long history of literal homelessness – will not necessarily be optimal for other homeless populations, such as youth or families. Further, there did not appear to be any substantive discussion in many of these studies about the impact of race on any type of homelessness experience, with the notable exception of the ethnographic studies. Given the known impacts of race on federal, state, and local housing policies throughout the 20th century, and the legacy that such policies continue to perpetuate today, it seems foolhardy to try to devise "colorblind" homelessness policy that does not explicitly acknowledge and address this history.

The implicit focus on the chronically homeless is especially confusing for policy makers and members of the public who are also familiar with the counts of homeless students that are required by the McKinney-Vento Act and done separately from the PITC. All public K-12 school districts in the nation who receive any kind of federal funding are required to identify and provide services to all homeless students in their districts. However, as the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty report (2017) notes, the definition that school districts use far is broader than the HUD definition, primarily because it includes students that are living in doubled up conditions.

Use of the school district definition could enable communities to roughly estimate at least some portion of their doubled up populations, since almost every student lives with other family members in similar circumstances. In addition to the expanded definition of homelessness, these district counts are essentially a form of service based homeless count, utilizing a service that almost every child in the country has access to at one point or another. In this respect, the school district counts address two of the main critiques of the PITC – using a definition that includes more precariously housed people and using a service based counting method that has some built-in reliability and consistency not found in other types of homeless services. While extensive lobbying at the federal level would be required to somehow combine

or better align the HUD and Department of Education definitions, communities can – and should – use both sets of data, and not the PITC alone, to establish their understanding of the size and scope of its homeless population.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this review makes clear that there is a substantial and contested history of modern efforts to count the nation's homeless, long before the advent of HUD's Point-in-Time Count. What makes this history and the ongoing debate over the accuracy and relevance of homeless counts most critical is the way in which these seemingly neutral estimates are, in fact, highly subjective. The definitions and methods used are all deeply embedded with assumptions about who the homeless are – or are expected to be – irrespective of their actual characteristics and identities. These assumptions, and the vast public and private service system that has developed around them, have developed over four decades, and homeless counts are now a central feature of that system. However, through this brief history and overview of the literature about the many homeless count methods and their benefits and drawbacks, perhaps a more thoughtful discussion can be had regarding the role that homeless count data should have on the development of future local, state, and federal policies. Or, perhaps more importantly, the limitations of these data and how other types of research can be used to better inform those policies.

Terminology

CoC: This is the acronym for a Continuum of Care. A CoC is a HUD defined geographic region that is authorized to apply for homeless service grants and to represent the homeless service organizations in its region for the purposes of any federal homeless service funding and programs. The CoC system was established in the mid-1990s.

The HEARTH Act: The 2009 congressional reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act. The acronym stands for The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2009.

HMIS: This acronym stands for Homeless Management Information System. This is an umbrella term for any HUD-approved database system used to track homeless clients served by any participating organization within a CoC.

Homeless definition – U.S. Department of Education: Publicly funded school districts across the nation are required to conduct a count of their homeless student population, separately from the HUD PITC process. The definition used by those districts is different from the one used by HUD, and is as follows:

(2) The term homeless children and youths' —

(A) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (within the meaning of section 103(a)(1)); and

(B) includes —

(i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;

(ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (within the meaning of section 103(a)(2)(C));

(iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and

(iv) migratory children (as such term is defined in section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

Homeless definition - HUD: Per the HEARTH Act, homelessness is defined as:

SEC. 103. [42 USC 11302]. GENERAL DEFINITION OF HOMELESS INDIVIDUAL.

(a) IN GENERAL.—For purposes of this Act, the term "homeless", "homeless individual", and

"homeless person" means—

(1) an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence;

(2) an individual or family with a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings, including a car, park, abandoned building, bus or train station, airport, or camping ground;

(3) an individual or family living in a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangements (including hotels and motels paid for by Federal, State, or local government programs for low-income individuals or by charitable organizations, congregate shelters, and transitional housing);

(4) an individual who resided in a shelter or place not meant for human habitation and who is exiting an institution where he or she temporarily resided;

(5) an individual or family who—

(A) will imminently lose their housing, including housing they own, rent, or live in without paying rent, are sharing with others, and rooms in hotels or motels not paid for by Federal, State, or local government programs for low-income individuals or by charitable organizations, as evidenced by—

(i) a court order resulting from an eviction action that notifies the individual or family that they must leave within 14 days;

(ii) the individual or family having a primary nighttime residence that is a room in a hotel or motel and where they lack the resources necessary to reside there for more than 14 days; or

(iii) credible evidence indicating that the owner or renter of the housing will not allow the individual or family to stay for more than 14 days, and any oral statement from an individual or family seeking homeless assistance that is found to be credible shall be considered credible evidence for purposes of this clause;

(B) has no subsequent residence identified; and

(C) lacks the resources or support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing; and

(6) unaccompanied youth and homeless families with children and youth defined as homeless under other Federal statutes who--

(A) have experienced a long term period without living independently in permanent housing,

(B) have experienced persistent instability as measured by frequent moves over such period, and

(C) can be expected to continue in such status for an extended period of time because of chronic disabilities, chronic physical health or mental health conditions, substance addiction, histories of domestic violence or childhood abuse, the presence of a child or youth with a disability, or multiple barriers to employment.

HUD: The acronym for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act: First passed as the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, the first and still primary federal homeless assistance legislation is now known as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. President Clinton added the name of the late Representative Bruce Vento to the reauthorized legislation on October 30, 2000.

PITC: The acronym for the HUD mandated Point-in-Time Count.

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