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# Toronto's proposed street count won't count for much at all:

Toronto City Council should focus on solutions (subsidized housing, services, shelters and outreach)

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## Method for counting the homeless is fatally flawed

**Counting cars on the Don Valley Parkway:** Imagine sending a handful of people with clipboards onto the Don Valley Parkway to count the number of vehicles, and passengers, as a method of understanding the scale of Toronto's transportation and transit issues. The large pile of numbers would be interesting, but not particularly useful in understanding the scale of the problem. The DVP is only one part of the city's transportation system. Depending on the time of day, and the acuity of the counters, the numbers may – or may not – reflect anything more than a momentary snapshot.

That's the central problem with the "point-in-time count on one evening / night in November" homeless count proposed in the June 14, 2005, report to Community Services Committee titled "Determining the Number and Service Needs of Homeless Persons Living on Toronto's Streets and in its Public Spaces". *At best, it will provide a momentary snapshot, and that snapshot will likely not be very useful in determining the scale of Toronto's homelessness disaster.*

The staff report raises significant questions:

**WHY NOVEMBER?** The late fall date appears to be drawn from a false perception that street homelessness is more damaging to individuals in the winter than the summer. A recent report from Toronto's Medical Officer of Health reports that, in the general population, heat-related premature deaths have been significantly higher than cold-related premature deaths. Since epidemiological studies show that homeless people have much higher morbidity (illness) and mortality (death) rates than the general population, the trend noted by the Medical Officer of Health means that homeless people are suffering mightily during Toronto's almost continual heat and smog alerts. Why count in November and not, say, in June – or February, for that matter.

**WHY IGNORE THE "HIDDEN HOMELESS":** The staff report notes that the single largest group of homeless people in Toronto – the "hidden homeless" (which includes "couch-surfers", individuals and families living in short-term arrangements with friends or family and other insecure arrangements) – will NOT be counted by the street count. Homeless studies in communities such as Peterborough and Sudbury have estimated that for every person in a shelter or on the streets, there are three to four "hidden homeless" people.

**WHY UNDERCOUNT THE HOMELESS:** The staff report confirms that a standard flaw reported from homeless counts in other cities is that all the various methodologies significantly undercount the number of homeless people. There are many reasons for this undercounting, but the two most important are problems with the methodology of the counting, and the "invisibility" of homeless people.

**Problems with methodology:** The homeless counts surveyed in the staff report show a wide range of results. For instance, Edmonton's homeless count reports more homeless people than Vancouver – even though the Vancouver CMA is twice as large as Edmonton. Are there actually more homeless people in Edmonton than Vancouver, or is the methodology flawed? No one can say for sure.

**‘Invisibility’ of homeless people:** A more serious issue, considering the point-and-count strategy proposed by city staff, is the difficulty in finding and counting homeless people. People who are homeless, especially those who have been on or close to the streets for any period of time, adopt a deliberate strategy of remaining invisible to avoid detection by police or civic authorities. The decision by Toronto City Council to drive homeless people from Nathan Phillips Square and other public spaces in February has added to this problem. Street outreach workers report that it is increasingly difficult to maintain contact with homeless clients. This survival strategy means that it will be almost impossible for the city to accurately assess the number of homeless people.

**WHY EVEN BOTHER TO MAKE THE COUNT:** The staff report correctly notes that there is “no single consistent approach to determining the number and service needs of homeless people on the street and in public spaces”. Dr. J. David Hulchanski, the leading Canadian research on housing and homelessness, has written:

*“We need to concede that all attempts at counting the houseless are doomed to failure, thanks to insurmountable methodological problems. There are too many who do not want to be counted, too many places where the houseless can find a place to stay for a night, and no method at all for counting those in the ‘concealed houseless’ category. In addition, attempts to count are never provided enough resources to produce a somewhat defensible number.”*

Dr. Hulchanski’s observations are part of a recent article on counting the homeless, which is attached as an appendix to this report.

## **FOCUS ON HOUSING AND SERVICES, NOT COUNTING**

The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee urges Toronto City Council to spare city staff and others the time and cost of a street count that will not count for much. Instead, we believe that Council and city staff should focus its efforts on concrete solutions, including housing, shelter and services. We agree with Dr. Hulchanski, who concludes his survey of street counts by stating:

*“While the causes of homelessness may be complex, the solutions are not. Those who are currently unhoused need to be adequately, affordably and securely rehoused as quickly as possible. Then any support services provided for those who need them (job training, transition support, mental health, substance abuse) have a decent chance of being effective. Those who are at risk of becoming houseless need measures that will prevent that outcome. **We already know more than enough about the nature and magnitude of the problem to embark on rehousing and prevention programs. Addressing ‘homelessness’ is a political problem, not a statistical or definitional problem.**”*

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## A NEW CANADIAN PASTIME? COUNTING HOMELESS PEOPLE

Addressing and preventing 'homelessness' is a political problem, not a statistical or definitional problem.

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by David Hulchanski, University of Toronto  
December 2000

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How many homeless people are there? In Toronto? In Canada? Who knows? No one knows. For some, it seems, trying to count them is more important than taking action.

There is agreement on two observations: the number is very large (measured in the many thousands, not the dozens or hundreds), and the number is increasing.

In Toronto we know the number of people who use emergency shelters on any night. The numbers are increasing: an average of 4,900 people per night in 2000 – compared to 4,600 in 1999, 2,400 in 1992, and about 1,000 per night in the mid-1980s. We do not know how many other people are houseless on a given night. Nor do we know how many people in a given year have been houseless. We do know that about 30,000 different people used Toronto's shelters last year.

If we had precise numbers, would 'we' – all of us in Canada who are fortunate enough to be adequately housed – then take action?

The National Post is now wondering how many homeless people there are.

In a Christmas gift to Canada's unhoused people a 'news' article notes "it's difficult to gauge how bad the problem actually is." ("Trying to make homelessness add up: Every group in town seems to have a different number and a different definition of the problem," National Post, December 23, 2000.) This, of course, implies that it may not be a very bad problem after all. (As President Clinton might say, it all depends on how you define 'bad.')

Why should the well housed who work at the National Post – or any of us – be worried about better statistics, when there are certainly many thousands of unhoused people? Why not at least start by resettling a few hundred into adequate, affordable housing rather than worry about exactly how many there are? If Conrad Black and others like him knew the exact number would they then join in the movement to decrease and eventually eliminate homelessness in Canada?

Not very likely.

Discussions of the number of unhoused people usually mix two very different questions: How many unhoused people are there right now (that is, on a given day or night). And, how many people have been unhoused over a given period-of-time (that is, how many people are affected

by the problem). The first is called a 'point prevalence' measure (a point-in-time count) and the second is called a 'period prevalence' measure.

In the case of numbers we do know, the use of emergency shelter beds, the 4,900 per night using Toronto's shelters is the 'point prevalence' measure and the 30,000 different people using Toronto's shelters is the 'period prevalence' measure for one year.

Period prevalence is a measure of the cumulative impact of the extent to which a given condition affects the total population of an area. It provides a helpful summary of the extent of the problem.

In the case of Toronto, the 30,000 people who used emergency shelters during 1999 represent about 1.3% of the City's 2.3 million population. This measure of the cumulative impact of something as avoidable and harmful to human health and well-being as being houseless should be enough to stir federal, provincial and local officials into action. Yet it doesn't.

Will a point prevalence count make any political difference? Such one day counts have very little practical or policy relevance – once we already know there is a problem and that its magnitude is significant. The number provided by a point-in-time count, even if such a count was methodologically possible in large metropolitan areas like Toronto, is simply a very crude snapshot.

The rationale for research on determining the extent of a particular problem is to provide the public and policy makers further knowledge so as to improve policies and programs. In the case of homelessness, we already know enough about the magnitude of the problem. It is huge compared to the current magnitude of federal and provincial policies and programs aimed at addressing and preventing the problem.

Point-in-time counts of the unhoused in a community focus on individuals affected by the problem on a given night, rather than on the problem itself. The point-in-time count does not distinguish between those who are only unhoused for that one particular night, those who are periodically unhoused (slipping back and forth), and those who have been unhoused for a long time. Point-in-time counts also lump everyone together, contributing to the erroneous assumption that homeless people are one homogeneous group. Almost any well-designed research project on the problem will produce greater policy and program relevant insights than a point-in-time enumeration.

In addition to confusing these two very different questions about prevalence, the National Post article then slips from this statistical question to the alleged problem of defining homelessness. "But another problem is that 'homeless' and 'homelessness' do not have exact definitions" we are told. An article on the same day also quotes Ontario's housing minister as saying the following about homelessness: "This is kind of the Rubik's Cube of public policy," said Mr. Clement. "Just when you think you've got one face of it sorted out, there's five other sides that you've got to work on."

For those who want to counsel and justify inaction, nothing can top the problem of defining homelessness. Homelessness is an awkward term serving as a catchall for a contemporary form of severe destitution. It involves socio-economic arrangements that exist quite apart from those troubled by them. It is a term applied to different social, economic, and political realities, as well as realities in the lives of the people affected. (For a discussion of the definition of homelessness, see the questions and answers on the Raising the Roof website: <http://www.raisingtheroof.org/issues/faq.html> )

For policy and program purposes – for those serious about taking action – homelessness should be easy enough to define. It is the absence of a secure, adequate and affordable place to live. If Ontario’s Housing Minister Clement, for example, were to be ‘homeless’ tonight he would have no problem defining the precise situation he was in. Nor would he have any problem defining what it was that he required to end his ‘homelessness.’

For some, the problem of defining the problem serves as a convenient and self-serving “Rubik’s Cube.” For them, until we can precisely define the problem and very carefully measure it, it is simply irrational and irresponsible to try to do something about it. This was the point of another Christmas gift to Canada’s unhoused, a Globe and Mail editorial, that concluded with the statement “we need to trace the shape of the problem before we start filling it with solutions.” (“Gimme shelter –homelessness in Canada: It’s clearly a problem - but what is homelessness, and why does it exist?” December 23, 1998.)

We already know that it is impossible to count a mobile population that lacks a permanent address. All our statistics about people and their households start with their address – their fixed location. Housed people may decide to move from one fixed location to another, but they always have an address. Unhoused people do not.

We also know that definitions do matter. The way a problem is defined tells us not only where to look for what we seek but also how to recognize it when we find it.

The best advice on defining “homelessness” for research and policy purposes has been proposed by a researcher at the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (“Homelessness: A proposal for a Global Definition and Classification,” by Sabine Springer, Habitat International, Vol. 24, 2000, pp. 475-484. [Selections from this article are in the RESOURCES section of the HOUSING AGAIN website (<http://www.housingagain.web.net>). Go to Resources and in the keyword search box put the last name of the author: springer ]

As Springer notes, homelessness is a term burdened with many possible meanings. The U.N., in its data collection and research efforts, will start using the term “houselessness.” How do you collect data on ‘home’-lessness? Home is a social, psychological, emotional construct. ‘House’-lessness, in contrast, is a much clearer, straightforward term. Whatever other problems some people in society may have, some of which are often included under the term ‘homelessness,’ the term houselessness presents no such confusion. It refers to the one crucial factor all homeless people have in common. While homelessness is not just a housing problem, it is always a housing problem.

Houseless people fall into three very clear categories: the ‘absolute’ houseless, the ‘concealed’ houseless and those who are ‘at risk’ of houselessness. In addition, there are many more ‘inadequately housed’ people, some of whom are at risk of houselessness.

**Absolute Houselessness.** Houseless persons are defined as people sleeping rough (on the street, in public places or in any other place not meant for human habitation) or using public or private shelters.

**Concealed houselessness.** People who are houseless but temporarily housed with friends or family because they cannot afford housing for themselves are another category. Without this temporary privately offered housing opportunity they would be living on the street or be in an emergency shelter.

**At Risk of Houselessness.** In addition to absolute and concealed houselessness, some people are at grave risk of losing their housing with no other housing option lined up.

Finally, not all people who have their own place to live are adequately housed. Being inadequately housed is not the same as being houseless, or at grave risk of houselessness, but it can lead to houselessness. Before becoming houseless many people have been living in substandard housing situations. Their way out of houselessness is also likely to pass by this sort of housing. If vacancy rates are low and no social housing is available, it is difficult to permanently escape houselessness.

What does all this U.N. advice mean for ‘counting the homeless’ in Canada? It can help those who attempt such a count to be much clearer about naming what they are trying to count (that is, one or more of the specific categories – absolute, concealed, or at risk). Other than that, not much.

We need to concede that all attempts at counting the houseless are doomed to failure, thanks to insurmountable methodological problems. There are too many who do not want to be counted, too many places where the houseless can find a place to stay for a night, and no method at all for counting those in the ‘concealed houseless’ category. In addition, attempts to count are never provided enough resources to produce a somewhat defensible number.

Researchers also know from experience that a primary obstacle to counting unhoused people is that multiple purposes exist for embarking on the task and there are many constituencies clamouring for different kinds of information (inclusions and exclusions from the count). Thus, the intended use of and the impetus for asking ‘how many’ plays a role in framing the parameters for a particular study. In the end, confusion and charges of bias are the inevitable result. The numbers produced in any ‘point-in-time’ count are estimates that were either already known (and thus held in suspect by some), or numbers that cannot possibly be true (and thus held in suspect by others).

Even if we take the time and resources to produce a somewhat defensible estimate we remain stuck with a final question: so what? What difference will such a point-in-time count make? Who will do what with the number? How many houseless people will be better off as a result?

For several years homelessness has been appearing at the top of the list of issues Canadians care about. In the most recent poll, the annual year-end Maclean's survey, 85% of Canadians "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree" with the statement "increase spending to eliminate homelessness." Only one other issue received higher support. When further asked to choose between investing in a stronger and more up-to-date military or funding housing for all homeless people in Canada, there is no contest: stronger military 19%; housing the homeless 75%.

In his commentary on these results, Allan Gregg notes that "people know that to do nothing is to make their problems worse" and that problems in the areas of poverty, health care, and education "have grown out of inactivity rather than any specific initiative that has gone wrong." In short, the public wants government action on these issues.

To be fair, there may be another interpretation. Perhaps the wrong question was asked. The Financial Post's editorial writer Peter Foster wonders: "what if the homelessness question had been whether spending should be increased despite the fact that past spending appears only to have aggravated the problem?" He provides no evidence or source for this assertion, common among the extreme right in the U.S. that 'if your build it they will come.' We, taxpaying housed people, it seems, already know that there are too many welfare bums out there who will stop paying their mortgage or rent and abandon their jobs, friends and belongings when they hear that more emergency shelter beds are available.

While the causes of homelessness may be complex, the solutions are not. Those who are currently unhoused need to be adequately, affordably and securely rehoused as quickly as possible. Then any support services provided for those who need them (job training, transition support, mental health, substance abuse) have a decent chance of being effective. Those who are at risk of becoming houseless need measures that will prevent that outcome. We already know more than enough about the nature and magnitude of the problem to embark on rehousing and prevention programs. Addressing 'homelessness' is a political problem, not a statistical or definitional problem.

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