

CENSUS 2010: SERVICE-BASED ENUMERATION (SBE) OPERATION

WHAT IS THE SERVICE-BASED ENUMERATION OPERATION?

The Service-Based Enumeration (SBE) operation is the three day effort by which the U.S. Census Bureau enumerates the homeless population every ten years.

WHY IS THE SBE OPERATION IMPORTANT?

The results of the decennial census have significant impacts throughout the country. Exclusion of people from the count, inaccurate counts, or under-representation of populations and their characteristics in the count have the potential to gravely impact communities across America for the ten years following the census. Most significantly, the census affects political representation. U.S. House of Representative seats are derived from the population totals from the census. Moreover, census data is used by state legislatures to determine the boundaries of Congressional and state legislative districts. In addition, census data is used to guide resource distribution. Over 300 billion dollars of federal funds are awarded to states each year based on the census. For example, the census impacts the amount of funds awarded for such activities as new roads, hospitals, schools, child-care and senior citizen centers, and homeless assistance programs.

WHO ADMINISTERS THE SBE OPERATION?

The U.S. Census Bureau, a division of the United States Department of Commerce, administers the SBE operation. The Census Bureau also partners with organizations such as National Coalition for the Homeless to ensure a more accurate and comprehensive census. Partners provide lists of shelters and nonsheltered outdoor locations, and encourage citizens and residents to participate in the census.

HOW IS THE SBE OPERATION CONDUCTED?

The Census Bureau plans to conduct the 2010 SBE operation over a three-day period.

On the first night, enumerators will count persons residing in shelters, which include:

- emergency shelters for those without traditional housing
- shelters for runaway, neglected, or homeless children and youth
- shelters for abused women and children
- transitional shelters
- hotels and motels used to house those without traditional housing.

On the second day, enumerators will interview persons at regularly scheduled mobile food vans and persons at soup kitchens. If individuals at the mobile food vans and soup kitchens report a “usual residence,” they are not included in the SBE operation and are instead included in the general population count.

On the third night, enumerators will count persons at pre-identified targeted nonsheltered outdoor locations.

WHEN WILL THE 2010 SBE OPERATION OCCUR?

The Census 2010 SBE operation will occur March 29, 2010 through March 31, 2010.

WHAT ARE POTENTIAL CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING THE SBE OPERATION?

There exist inherent problems when enumerating persons experiencing homelessness, including:

- Some homeless people's survival depends on their ability to hide, making it difficult to enumerate the population.
- Because the population is characteristically on the move in attempt to find adequate shelter, attempts at "snapshot" counts will never be complete.
- Some homeless people do not want to admit that they are homeless.
- Homeless people are not uniquely identifiable as such by any physical characteristic, and thus cannot be identified easily.
- Some homeless individuals are afraid to speak to enumerators, as enumerators are at times mistaken for police or other authority figures with which the population has had conflict.
- Use of homeless persons as enumerators, an effective strategy for identifying locations where homeless people congregate, is impeded by Census Bureau requirements that enumerators present two form of identification prior to hire. Many homeless people have lost their identification papers.

WHAT ACTIONS CAN BE TAKEN TO ASSURE A SUCCESSFUL SBE OPERATION?

Concerned individuals, homeless advocates, and homeless assistance service providers should:

- Encourage persons experiencing homelessness to participate in the 2010 Census. The U.S. Census Bureau offers advertising and recruiting materials online at www.census.gov/2010census.
- Ensure that worksheets sent to social service organizations in your community which list emergency shelters and nonsheltered outdoor locations are completed and returned to the U.S. Census Bureau
- Contact your regional field office (<http://www.census.gov/field/www/>) to volunteer to become a census questionnaire assistance location or Be Counted site, which distributes census forms.
- Form a community-based Complete Count Committee. A Complete Count Committee allows community members and persons experiencing homelessness to flexibly develop a strategy to enhance the SBE operation and representation of homeless persons in the 2010 Census. To start a Complete Count Committee contact your local U.S. Census Bureau office, which can be found online at www.census.gov/field/www/.
- Prepare a job fair with the Census Bureau, where a Census Bureau representative administers the test and applicants complete all necessary paperwork. The job fair should be exclusively for homeless individuals. Contact your local Census Bureau office for additional information.
- Write, e-mail, or call your U.S. Representative and U.S. Senators as well as U.S. Census Bureau officials asking them to not release a separate homeless count because the count impacts poverty levels, which are used for funding. An undercount of persons experiencing homelessness, thus results in limited funding.

Furthermore, please contact National Coalition for the Homeless at (202)462-4822 or info@nationalhomeless.org with additional questions or concerns about the SBE operation.

The National Coalition for the Homeless will funnel information from various sources to homeless people, homeless advocacy organizations, and homeless service providers as it advocates for an accurate and comprehensive 2010 Census, which includes targeted efforts to include persons experiencing homelessness.

WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF THE SBE OPERATION?

During the 1980 Census, the enumeration of homeless persons was known as Mission Night, or M-Night. The operation was a one-night effort that occurred around midnight. Persons were counted at shelters, low-cost transient quarters, all night movie houses, bus and railroad stations, and local jails. There was no systematic homeless count. Although overnight guests at shelters were counted, the count was lumped in with the general population. Furthermore, homeless people were randomly counted on the streets and grouped with the general population count. There were no targeted efforts or procedures to count people living on the streets or in open public places. Because of a lack of coordinated efforts to enumerate homeless individuals, there is not a specific number for the Mission Night count. Classified under Noninstitutional Persons in Group Quarters, Low Cost Transient Quarters, the 1980 Census enumerated 41,481 persons. This count does not include all persons experiencing homelessness during the Mission Night enumeration (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1980). However, the number can serve as a rough estimate of one segment of the homeless population.

The 1990 Census, entitled Shelter and Street Night (S-Night), was the first concentrated effort to enumerate persons experiencing homelessness. The 1990 count was the first time that the Census Bureau worked with organizations and localities to develop a supplemental database prior to conducting the Census. The database included places where persons experiencing homelessness reside. The 1990 Census was also the first census to not incorporate the homeless count into the general population count. Still, the Census Bureau never intended for the S-Night count to be used as a count of the total homeless population. The S-night operation enumerated persons experiencing homelessness at emergency shelters, shelters for runaway, neglected, and homeless youth, shelters for abused women, and at street locations identified prior to conducting the census. In total, the operation counted 228,621 homeless individuals. The count was far from accurate or comprehensive, leading to drastic changes in the 2000 Census.

The 2000 Census was the first Service-Based Enumeration operation. Instead of conducting the operation for a single night, the operation was distributed over three days. On March 27, 2000, persons in shelters were counted. On March 28, 2000, persons using regularly scheduled food vans and soup kitchens were interviewed. If a person indicated a usual place of residence, he or she was not included in the separate count, but instead was included in the general count. On March 29, 2000, individuals at pre-identified targeted nonsheltered outdoor locations were enumerated. The total number of homeless persons recorded during this three day operation was 280,527.

Prior SBE operations were fraught with challenges. During the 1990 Census, the following problems occurred:

- Of the 39,000 jurisdictions solicited to supplement the U.S. Census Bureau's database of shelters and outdoor locations, only 14,200 jurisdictions responded.
- No effort was made to enumerate individuals living in non-traditional housing, such as cars, dumpsters, rooftops, bushes, trees and cardboard structures.
- Abandoned buildings were not entered by enumerators. Instead, enumerators waited outside of the abandoned building from the hours of 4:00am to 8:00am and counted only those persons exiting the building.
- Weather affected the count, as cold temperatures caused persons experiencing homelessness to retreat even further.
- In certain cities there was a lack of enumerators to accurately conduct the count in one night.
- Enumerators often tripled-up, causing them to cover less ground.
- Other enumerators reportedly ignored (and did not count) persons experiencing homelessness at locations other than those specified previously.
- Some shelters stated that the enumerators ran out of time and left prior to counting everyone at the shelter.
- Some enumerators refused to count residents at shelters who held employment because an employed person did not match the enumerator's definition of homeless.

- Some enumerators left forms at shelters with no instructions regarding proper protocol for reporting data.
- Some shelters would not let the census takers in because they found the S-night operation bogus.
- Independent counts yielded significantly higher numbers than those reported by the census. For example, Atlanta, Georgia counted over 15,000 homeless individuals, while the census only counted 2,401 homeless individuals on the streets.

During the 2000 Census, the following problems occurred:

- Drop-in centers, outreach programs, as well as health care facilities were not included.
- Shelters that remain open only one or two days a week and those that are not open all day were missed.
- Persons who resided in nonsheltered outdoor locations other than those on the database were not included in the operation's count.
- Abandoned buildings, included in the 1990 Census, were not included in the 2000 Census.

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