

EVERYONE WINS WHEN **EVERYONE IS COUNTED**



CALIFORNIANS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS COUNT!



Approximately 129,972 Californians are homeless every night, meaning they lack a stable, fixed residence. This includes 89,543 people in unsheltered locations and 12,396 unaccompanied youth under 18. They may live on the street, in cars, and in other places not intended for habitation.

African Americans are heavily overrepresented, comprising 40% of the national homeless population compared to 13% of the overall U.S. population¹

UNIQUE BARRIERS TO CENSUS PARTICIPATION

All persons who “usually reside” in a state must be counted in the census, even those who lack an ordinary residence.² But the residence-based procedures used to count the general population, e.g., mail and door-to-door follow-up, are largely ineffective when applied to people experiencing homelessness.³

Challenges to an accurate count of people experiencing homelessness in California include:

Hard-to-find locations: The criminalization of homelessness – local ordinances that restrict or prohibit sleeping or “camping” in public – creates substantial physical challenges to enumeration, as people seek inconspicuous locations to rest, away from residences and businesses.⁴ Even in communities without such ordinances, many people experiencing homelessness prefer the privacy and safety of unexposed sites.

Fear and distrust: Location barriers are further exacerbated by the substantial fear and distrust many Californians experiencing homelessness feel toward government officials and the public. Contributing to this are harassment by police and business owners⁵ and fear that sharing personal information might later facilitate arrest.⁶ Unaccompanied youth under 18 may fear being returned to an abusive home or entering the foster care or juvenile justice systems.

UNIQUE BARRIERS (CONTINUED)

Internet Access: Using the internet as the primary way to answer the 2020 Census is particularly challenging for people experiencing homelessness, as they are “far less likely to have internet access than the general population.”⁷

Age: Children under the age of 5 are missed at disproportionately high rates in the census. Of the 1.5 million people living in shelters nationally in 2015, over 152,000 were children under age 5.⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BOOST PARTICIPATION

Substantially expand and refine the use of enumerators experiencing homelessness, who:

1. Possess more accurate knowledge of where Californians experiencing homelessness live;
2. Can secure the trust of people who otherwise shy away from encounters with government officials; and
3. May approach their job with greater commitment and passion for ensuring every Californian experiencing homelessness is counted.⁹

Create robust lists of outdoor, service-based, and transitory locations that census-takers should visit. Local government agencies and service providers are good sources of information about heavily-frequented service locations, e.g., soup kitchens, and out-of-the-way places people seek shelter.

Build stronger partnerships with service providers and advocates who work with Californians experiencing homelessness. These trusted messengers can offer invaluable advice to census-takers, as well as legitimize the census and explain its importance in bringing resources to the community.

ENDNOTES

- 1 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, The 2018 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, Dec. 2018
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey: Questions and Answers, Feb. 2010
- 3 Brendan Kearns, Down for the Count: Overcoming the Census Bureau's Neglect of the Homeless, National Coalition for the Homeless, 2012
- 4 Ibid
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Kenneth Darga, Sampling and the Census: A Case Against the Proposed Adjustments for Undercount, 1999, page 12
- 7 Cara Brumfield, Counting People Experiencing Homelessness: A Guide to 2020 Census Operations, Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2018, page 3
- 8 Ibid
- 9 Kearns, page 15

For more information about the Census Policy Advocacy Network, please contact
CPAN@AdvanceProj.org or visit
AdvancementProjectCA.org/CPAN