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ENUMERATION OF HOMELESS PEOPLE

Counting the Homeless in the United Kingdom Census

Note by the Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This paper discusses some of the issues around the counting of the homeless population for the United Kingdom Census. The emphasis is on how we collect Census data on Rough Sleepers (or the roofless.) However, to put this in context, there is also a brief section on how the homeless 'rootless' will be counted.
2. Collecting accurate data on Rough Sleepers is an extremely difficult and often costly task. The paper examines how the Office for National Statistics (ONS) attempted this during its last Census in 2001 and explains some of the challenges encountered. An update is then provided on some of its ongoing research which should help ensure a successful count for the next Census in 2011. This includes an insight into the work carried out by Local Authorities and charities in counting this group and a consideration of how ONS can best utilise this expertise. Finally, the paper presents ONSs current proposals for counting Rough Sleepers at the next Census.
3. The content of this paper refers to work carried out by ONS which covers Census taking in England and Wales. The General Register Office for Scotland and Northern Ireland Statistical

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Research Agency share common population definitions with ONS. However, Scotland and Northern Ireland have different policies and infrastructures for supporting the homeless, so will therefore develop their enumeration approaches independently. However, research and ideas are regularly exchanged between the United Kingdom's three statistical organisations.

II. ENUMERATING THE HOMELESS ROOTLESS

4. This section explains how the homeless rootless (those without a home of their own, but who are not sleeping out on the streets) will be counted in the next Census.

5. In the United Kingdom, people with no usual address but who are present in a household on census night will be counted as being resident at that address. Therefore, they will not be distinguishable from other household residents.

6. Homeless people staying in a hostel or night shelter will be counted using a different approach. These buildings will be enumerated as Communal Establishments (CE). This term is used to describe managed residential accommodation or institutions). CE managers will get their own questionnaire to complete containing basic questions on the accommodation type and including a headcount of all visitors staying there on Census night. However, anyone staying at the establishment who has no usual residence elsewhere would also be expected to complete an Individual questionnaire, including any non United Kingdom residents who intend to stay in the country for three months or more. The Individual questionnaire contains the complete set of Census questions that would normally be completed by household residents.

7. Local Census field managers will contact hostels and night shelters several weeks before the Census to make arrangements and assess any requirements for special supplies such as literacy aids or translations. The questionnaires will then be delivered just before Census day by a Special Enumerator. The CE manager is responsible for getting everything completed on Census night. The Special Enumerator will then return and collect the questionnaires by hand the following day.

III. ENUMERATION OF ROUGH SLEEPERS FOR THE 2001 CENSUS

A. Methodology

8. The last population Census in the United Kingdom was held on Sunday 29 April 2001. Prior to the Census, ONS liaised with the Rough Sleeper Unit of the Department of Environment, Transport and Regions (DETR). This department was responsible for implementing government policy on this issue at a local level, including the organisation of counts of Rough Sleepers by Local Authorities. Liaison also took place with charitable organisations such as the National Homes Alliance and Shelter from whom volunteers were sought to help conduct the enumeration. The count of Rough Sleepers was held on Census night between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. the following morning. For each location containing one or more Rough Sleeper, our Enumerators completed a Communal Establishment questionnaire, which had a specific category for Rough Sleepers. This gave us an address to link the individuals to. The Enumerators then either asked Rough Sleepers to complete their own Individual questionnaire, or tried to gather basic demographic information to do this on the individual's

behalf. If the Rough Sleeper was asleep an assessment was made as to age and sex, without waking them.

B. Outcome

9. The total number of Rough Sleepers recorded in the 2001 Census in England and Wales was 938. Compared with other counts at the time, this figure appears reasonable. However ONS had concerns about how the count was conducted, the biggest being that it took 866 local staff to carry out the work. Obviously, this was not cost effective.

10. Liaison with the other stakeholders had proved difficult. Although the organisations were initially helpful, certain conflicts of interest were encountered. In particular, there was a concern that Local Authority and Census counts might contradict each other. DETR were very focused on identifying areas with larger numbers of Rough Sleepers, so they could target their action where it was most worthwhile. The Census had slightly different needs – an accurate count of all Rough Sleepers, wherever they were. In a handful of cases Local Authorities even disputed the Census results where they varied considerably from their own counts.

11. In some areas, the numbers of voluntary sector staff agreeing to take part in the count were disappointing. This meant that many of those doing the counting had no experience of working with the homeless. Where this happened, the number of Census Enumerators employed tended to be larger as inexperienced people felt safer working in large groups. However, some of these large teams were unable to find any Rough Sleepers to count, as is born out in the ratio between field staff employed and people counted. The information gathered was very limited, and there was a feeling that a lot of work had gone into organising the count with limited results. Some of the reports coming back from field staff even suggested that some Rough Sleepers were being intimidated into leaving to ensure they were not counted in the area.

C. Lessons Learnt

12. ONSs experience in 2001 highlighted two main points:

- (a) ONS and its field staff did not hold detailed knowledge of where Rough Sleepers were and how to encourage them to participate in the Census. Despite best efforts, engaging with the experts who did hold this information was not always successful. This resulted in a more costly field operation. ONS therefore needs to find a way of using more local homelessness workers when counting Rough Sleepers. Such people would be more likely to know where to find Rough Sleepers and may also know some of them personally. This local knowledge would mean that the quantity and quality of information gathered is likely to be better. It might also present opportunities to enumerate with less people and bring down the cost of the operation;
- (b) There are many organisations with an interest in homelessness issues that would be able to contribute their knowledge to help conduct a better count. However, Rough Sleepers were, and continue to be, a very political issue, and these organisations often have conflicting interests. The DETR was concerned with maintaining the validity of their Local Authority Counts, whilst some of the

charitable organisations may have had reason to encourage a higher turn out on the streets. ONS needs to find a way of working effectively with central government, local government and the voluntary sector in order to utilise the knowledge held by these organisations. At the same time it needs to ensure its data collection procedures maintain statistical independence, so that a truly accurate count can be achieved.

D. Preparing for the next Census – Current Research

13. Work has begun on development of procedures for counting Rough Sleepers in the next Census in 2011.

14. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) are now responsible for overseeing Local Authority work on this issue. Under the current United Kingdom system, Local Authorities must conduct their own annual counts if they have more than ten Rough Sleepers. Under this rule, only around a quarter of the 376 Local Authorities in England and Wales are required to hold annual counts. As at Summer 2007, the current count of Rough Sleepers is 498, but this would exclude figures from any Local Authorities with ten or less Rough Sleepers.

15. ONS's starting point for the 2011 Census, was to learn more about how Local Authorities carry out their counts. If procedures used by them are working well, then they could be used or modified for the next Census. However, we would first need to ensure the procedures were fit for our purpose – obtaining an accurate count of all Rough Sleepers on Census night.

16. Traditionally in the United Kingdom, Rough Sleepers are attracted to London, and in particular Westminster Local Authority which contains about a fifth of all Rough Sleepers in England and Wales. Westminster conducts its counts twice a year, and therefore has a lot of expertise in working with this group. In September of last year, a colleague and I were invited by DCLG to observe a count of Rough Sleepers in Westminster.

E. Methodology of the Westminster Local Authority Count

17. The count we attended was conducted on 24th September 2008. Local Authority Counts are always held in the Spring or the Autumn, as warm summer nights may inflate the numbers willing to sleep out on the streets, whilst cold winters have the opposite effect. The count took place between midnight and 2am. This time was selected to maximise the chances of counting genuine Rough Sleepers. We were advised that some people seen around earlier may appear to be sleeping rough but could have a place in a night shelter later. There are also some 'professional beggars' who may look like Rough Sleepers, but who actually have their own homes to sleep in.

18. Westminster Local Authority was divided into three sectors. Each sector had three teams of two to do the counting, plus a sector leader and a supporting police officer. A day centre for the homeless was used as a base for the night and as a venue for a briefing session before the work started. A small team of administrators remained at this base bringing the total numbers involved in conducting the count to around 35.

19. Count staff had already been sent a set of written procedures to follow. The vast majority of people had done counts before, so the verbal briefing given before we went out was very brief and just emphasised the key points to remember.

20. One person was responsible for ensuring that procedures were followed consistently. They were introduced to everyone attending the briefing and we were clearly told that if anyone felt that any part of the count was being done incorrectly, to report it to them. A further safeguard to ensure accuracy was put in place in the way the counting pairs were made up. Around half the staff worked for Westminster Local Authority, whilst the remainder worked for charities or outreach organisations. Wherever possible, the teams doing the counting were made up of one of each type. The charity workers were considered a second line of verification.

21. Before starting work, count staff were issued with record books and maps of the area and given time to plan their route. Rough Sleeping hotspots were identified on the maps, but we were still expected to check all of our area. Health and safety was also emphasised, and we were instructed to make sure we avoided dead-ends and always had a planned escape route. Another safety precaution was to ensure count staff signed out when leaving and returning to the base. However, organisers said they had never had any serious health and safety incidents.

22. While observing the count an ONS officer accompanied Joe, an experienced Charity worker who knew the area and many of the Rough Sleepers well. Although some new people were found, in many cases Joe knew exactly who was going to be sleeping where.

23. Joe's approach was very different to that used in a typical Census enumeration. Joe spoke to people very informally – asking where they were staying for the night, but then often digressing into giving out advice about their situation. Everyone seemed comfortable to speak to him, although Joe did express scepticism at some of their answers. Joe knew around half of the people we spoke to and clearly had their trust. The paperwork was always completed away from the individual, and at no point did Joe tell any of them that he was carrying out a count.

24. Individuals were asked to give their full name and date of birth. If the person was not known, a description of them was also noted. Where these individuals moved on later in the night, it was hoped that the description taken would be enough to prevent double counting in neighbouring areas. If individuals refused to give information, count staffs were instructed to telephone their Sector Leader. The team's supporting police officer was then sent into the area to try and find the individual described and see if they could get the missing information.

25. Unlike in the procedures for the last Census, counters in Westminster were instructed to wake up anyone sleeping so they could get the information. This was always done verbally, with no physical contact. This happened on several occasions and no problems were experienced.

26. The guidance for conducting the count provided the following advice on who to include in the count:

27. 'In order to ensure the consistency of results, it is essential that all participants understand the definition of people sleeping rough which is being used for this exercise. The definition is "People sleeping, or bedded down, in the open air (such as on the streets, or in doorways, parks or bus shelters); people in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, or stations...)"

28. The definition does not include people in hostels or shelters, people in campsites or other sites used for recreational purposes, squatters, travellers, people who were there earlier or who were known to sleep rough on other occasions, but who were not there at the time of the count, people wandering around and sleeping sites without occupants. Research has found that in many areas people seen drinking in the street or begging (even if they have a blanket or a sleeping bag) are not necessarily sleeping rough and they should not be included unless they are clearly bedded down at the time of the count. Bedded down is taken to mean lying down in a sleeping bag, or other bedding.'

29. During the night, Joe and the ONS officer encountered eight people who appeared to be sleeping rough. Only one of these qualified for the count, meeting the definition of being 'bedded down' for the night. Most of the others claimed they had spots in night shelters that they would be returning to later. The police officer was sent to verify this, and by the time he arrived the individuals had moved on; it was impossible to know if they had gone to the shelter or not.

30. The count was completed at around 2am, at which point the Sector teams gathered back together and returned to the base. At this point paperwork was finalised, and submitted to the organisers. Around 70 Rough Sleepers had been counted on the night.

F. Issues for Census-taking Raised by Observing the Local Authority Count

31. Overall the Westminster count seemed to be extremely well organised. The local knowledge demonstrated by count staff seemed invaluable, as did their experience of speaking to Rough Sleepers on a regular basis. In many cases they were able to establish a rapport with people and gain their trust to get the information required. Most Census enumeration is carried out in a far more formal manner. Staff are always told to identify themselves and say exactly why they are calling. The more relaxed approach seemed to work better here, but it would be difficult for ONS to thoroughly train new Census staff in all the skills that they would need to do this. Again, cost effectiveness is an issue here, especially given that the job itself is just a few hours work.

32. Using existing expertise therefore seems preferable to recruiting and training new staff to take a count at Census time.

33. Considerable effort had also gone into maintaining the independence of the Local Authority counts, a very important factor for Census taking.

34. However, it appeared to be quite difficult to meet the definition of a rough sleeper and to be included in the count. Similar problems are likely at any Census count; the Westminster experience demonstrated that having a clear definition was essential, or staff would be asked to make very difficult judgements on whether people were going to be spending the whole night somewhere or not. It seemed a lot of the individuals moved to several spots during the night, possibly ending up in night shelters. Without clear guidelines, double counting could be a real issue.

35. It is worth remembering that Westminster is a centre of excellence for the counting of Rough Sleepers. Talking to some of the other count staff on the night, many expressed surprise

that figures in some of the other parts of the country were so low. This was perceived to be due to a lack of knowledge on how to conduct a good count where rough sleeping was less common.

G. Future Trends – the Impact of Homelessness Policy Change

36. Westminster Local Authority has changed its approach in recent years to reduce its number of Rough Sleepers. There had previously been numerous soup kitchens operating at night, but these were found to have encouraged rough sleeping around them, so have now been closed. Instead, investment has been put into the provision of day centres and spaces in night shelters and hostels. Locations where Rough Sleepers congregated such as subways or underground stations are now more likely to be locked up or hosed down with water late at night to discourage this from happening. Westminster has seen its number of Rough Sleepers half in the past few years and this trend looks set to continue.

H. Plans for the 2011 Census

37. Plans for the 2011 Census are now under development following the work with DCLG and Westminster. We are hoping to utilise the existing Local Authority Counts which will be taking place in Spring 2011. Where well organised counts are already running, ONS is investigating the feasibility of using this count data to complete a Census return, rather than holding its own separate Census count. There are two issues that need resolving for this to work.

38. Firstly, there is a problem with timing. Our next Census day will take place on Sunday, 27 March, which does fit into the Spring timeframe when counts are expected to take place. However, Local Authorities would normally count at all different dates throughout this period. Counts are also unlikely to take place on a Sunday night, as this would not be part of the working week for most Local Authority staff.

39. This problem is not insurmountable. There is a strong argument for not conducting a count of Rough Sleepers on Census night anyway, as a pre-publicised count is likely to impact on the numbers of people who are out on the streets. (Some Rough Sleepers will try to avoid 'authority' while some organisations may try to encourage a high turn out.) However, it may be possible to persuade Local Authorities to conduct their counts within a week or two before or after Census night.

40. Secondly, there is a problem of data sharing. ONS would effectively be using data gathered by another organisation to populate Census returns. There is some provision in the United Kingdom Census act to use admin data, although this has not been used before and the full legal implications would need to be explored further.

41. Where no formal counts are held we are proposing a different method. Every Local Authority has a homelessness contact. We suggest our local Census Field Managers contact these individuals a couple of months before Census day. They will ask for any Rough Sleeping hotspots as well as information on any homelessness charities in the area. The charities will then also be contacted to supplement this information. Depending on the number and location of Rough Sleepers, and Census Managers would make appropriate local arrangements to carry out a count on Census night, concentrating on known hotspots only. In these cases, Census staff

would be directly involved in the count, but we would try and ensure they are working with both Local Authority staff and any local voluntary workers.

III. CONCLUSIONS

42. To achieve an accurate count of Rough Sleepers in the United Kingdom, there remain a lot of challenges to overcome.

43. Organising any type of field operation that needs to happen late at night, and count people who may resist authority and who are transient in nature will always present difficulties. Even with effective planning and targeting of resources, something as unpredictable as the weather may have a dramatic effect on the results of any count of Rough Sleepers.

44. ONS will continue its research and try to put in place partnerships with homelessness experts that will optimise the effectiveness of its procedures. It is important that we put our own resources where they will deliver the best results, but also exploit the existing knowledge of homelessness experts. This means aiming to carrying out our counts with experienced staff wherever possible.

45. Even though the number of 'homeless roofless' is falling, there is nothing to suggest this group will ever disappear completely. Regardless of government policy, any individual may suffer the type of crisis that could lead to this situation occurring, even if only for a short time. ONS needs to balance the resource it puts into a group that is so small, difficult and costly to count, against the fact that Rough Sleepers are a vulnerable and politically important group who remain part of our population.

46. It may never be possible to have a Census count of Rough Sleepers that is all inclusive and of the highest quality whilst remaining totally cost effective. It is therefore for every Statistical organisation to decide where the best balance lies for them.
