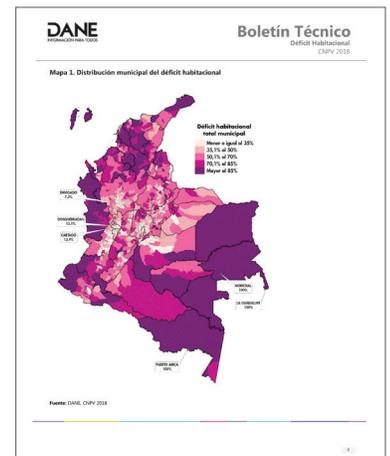# COUNTING THE UNCOUNTED: HOW CENSUSES CAPTURE HOMELESSNESS AROUND THE WORLD

Homelessness is one of the most visible manifestations of social and economic inequality. Recent estimates from UN-Habitat suggest that over 300 million people globally experience homelessness, while billions more live in inadequate housing conditions. Yet measuring homelessness remains one of the most difficult tasks for national statistical systems. Around the world, population and housing censuses play a key role in identifying people who lack stable housing and ensuring they are included in official statistics.

Census enumeration typically relies on household addresses and people without permanent housing can easily be uncounted. To address this challenge, national statistical offices often conduct special enumeration operations. These may involve counting individuals at

Measuring homelessness remains one of the most difficult tasks for national statistical systems.

shelters, food distribution sites, and other service locations, as well as identifying outdoor locations where people sleep. The United States Census Bureau uses a service-based enumeration approach in which census workers visit shelters, soup kitchens, and mobile food van stops to count people experiencing homelessness.

Similar strategies are used around the world. In its 2022 census, Argentina conducted targeted enumeration to count individuals sleeping in public spaces. People staying in shelters or temporary facilities were also recorded under the category of collective dwellings. Colombia has implemented specialized "street population" enumerations to identify individuals living in public spaces or temporary shelters. India counts people experiencing homelessness under the category of "houseless population." The 2011 census recorded about 1.77 million houseless individuals, defined as people sleeping in open or public places rather than in structures with a roof. Similarly, the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics includes homeless populations in its national census through special enumeration operations. During the 2017 census, officials allocated specific days to count homeless and mobile populations, reporting 38,415 homeless individuals nationwide.

Colombia, 2018. Housing Deficit Bulletin, p. 4.
https://gca.eastview.com/CENSUS-2393994BO.1.5

Argentina, 2022. Census Results. Collective Housing, Homeless Population, p.9. https://gca.eastview.com/CENSUS-2643784BO.1.9

India, 2011. Series 10. Uttar Pradesh. Pt07-B. Primary Census Abstract. Lalitpur, p. 22. https://gca.eastview.com/CENSUS-2412910BO.1.43

Left: Pakistan, 1998. District Census Report. Abbottabad, p. 177. https://gca.eastview.com/CENSUS-2527879BO.1.196

Above: Pakistan, 2023. Field Operation Plan, p. 63. https://gca.eastview.com/CENSUS-2682486BO.1.63

Global Census Archive brings together historical and contemporary documents from around the world in an easy-to-use platform built for various research needs. From field enumeration plans to analytical and tabular results, census publications reveal how countries around the world tackle the issue of homelessness and inadequate housing. GIS datasets hosted on the platform reveal housing conditions from around the world with variables related to occupancy, construction materials, cooking energy source and water and sewage infrastructure. Combined, these materials provide a powerful foundation for comparative and interdisciplinary research on global housing and homelessness.

Further reading on homelessness and censuses:

- "2020 Census: Counting People at Service-Based Locations," U.S. Census Bureau: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/planning-management/count/service-based-enumeration.html

- "Around 300 Million People Are Homeless Worldwide," Second World Summit For Social Development Blog : https://social.desa.un.org/world-summit-2025/blog/300million-people-homeless-worldwide

- "Census," Institute of Global Homelessness: https://ighomelessness.org/census/

- "Homelessness and Human Rights," United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner: https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-housing/homelessness-and-human-rights

- "Homelessness: Measuring and Monitoring the Challenge," OECD: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-monitoring-framework-to-measure-homelessness_3e98455b-en.html

- "Homeless Population in the 2017 Population Census," Gallup Pakistan: https://gallup.com.pk/post/32888