

NSW Statewide Street Count 2021

Technical Paper

Summary

- The 2021 NSW street count, the NSW Government's second annual street count, was completed between 2 February and 1 March 2021.
- Over 150 local organisations partnered with the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) to complete street counts in more than 280 towns and suburbs in 71 local government areas (LGA) across NSW.
- These partners included Specialist Homelessness Services, local councils and community housing providers, as well Aboriginal organisations, local community groups, Police and NSW Health.
- 1,141 people were counted during these street counts – a 13 per cent reduction compared to 2020.
- The annual street count will provide NSW Government with valuable data as it pursues the Premier's Priority of halving street sleeping across the state by 2025.
- In 2020 DCJ expanded its Assertive Outreach services to 58 LGAs.
- Street count results are used to inform locations for DCJ Assertive Outreach patrols. DCJ and partners have already commenced follow up Assertive Outreach patrols to the locations where people were counted sleeping rough during the street count.

Purpose

In February 2019 the NSW Government signed the 'End Street Sleeping' Agreement with the Institute of Global Homelessness, the City of Sydney and non-government partners. This included a commitment to reduce street homelessness by 50 per cent by 2025.

In June 2019 the Premier announced this 2025 target as one of the [14 Premier's Priorities for the NSW Government](#).

Gathering accurate data about the number of people experiencing street homelessness is essential to informing the best way to target resources to those who need the most support.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimated that in 2016 there were 2,588 people in NSW who were living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out.¹ These estimates were based on data collected in the 2016 Census.²

The ABS Census remains the primary metrics against which the Premier's Priority target is measured. However, ABS data is only available every five years and will not be available in the target year of 2025.

¹ [ABS, 2049.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016](#)

² Detailed information on the ABS homelessness definitions, estimation methodology and procedures is available at on the [ABS website](#).

Street counts assist in tracking progress towards the Premier's Priority target and measuring the effectiveness of initiatives to reduce street homelessness.

Street counts help foster local collaboration and inform local approaches to prevention, housing options and post-crisis support.

Street count results are used to inform locations for DCJ Assertive Outreach patrols. DCJ and partners have already commenced follow up Assertive Outreach patrols to the locations where people were counted sleeping rough during the street count.

Results

1,141 people were counted – a 13 per cent reduction compared to 2020 (see **Appendix A** for full table of results).³

In addition there were 23 locations where there was evidence of street homelessness (such as makeshift camps, sleeping bags or personal belongings) but no people were present to be counted, compared to 135 such locations in 2020.⁴

The City of Sydney, which accounts for the largest cohort of rough sleepers in the state, recorded a 19 per cent reduction.

Local government areas where more than 15 people were counted in 2020 which saw the largest decreases were:

- Parramatta – 94 in 2020 to 32 in 2021 (66 per cent reduction)
- Newcastle – 52 to 19 (63 per cent reduction)
- Central Coast – 58 to 27 (53 per cent reduction)
- Lake Macquarie – 33 to 18 (45 per cent reduction)
- Sutherland – 33 to 19 (42 per cent reduction)
- Tweed Valley – 77 to 58 (25 per cent reduction)

LGAs where there were more than 15 people counted in 2021 which saw the largest increases were:

- Wollongong – 10 in 2020 to 37 in 2021 (270 percent increase)
- Shoalhaven – 10 to 20 (233 percent increase)
- Clarence Valley Shire – 7 to 17 (143 percent increase)
- Fairfield – 7 to 15 (114 percent increase)

³ The total for the 2021 NSW street count was originally reported as 1,131 on 8 March but was revised to 1,141 after additional results were provided to DCJ from street count organisers in Dungog and Waverley.

⁴ Note, data on locations where there was evidence of street homelessness but no persons present excludes the City of Sydney LGA.

Planning

What is a street count?

Street counts provide a point-in-time count of the number of people in a location who are observed to be experiencing street homelessness.

Street Counts were run progressively in 71 LGAs across NSW in February 2021. The street count involves recording a head count of people sleeping rough in a designated geographic area.

Street counts are purely observational. No person is engaged during the count and the only data collected is the number of people counted in each location, their dwelling situation and whether they were accompanied by companion animals.

Who was counted?

Counting the number of people experiencing street homelessness is a challenging task. Counts are generally undertaken in the late evening and early morning while most people are asleep. It is not always accurate to assume from a person's appearance that they are experiencing street homelessness and some level of judgment is required. Advice is provided to people undertaking the street count.

The approach used in the NSW street count, which is based on approach used in the long-running the City of Sydney street count, is to count all people who:

- are carrying substantial belongings and who appear to have no accommodation
- are sleeping, laying or sitting on the pavement, street, parks, shops/business fronts, parking lots, road or railway underpasses
- are inhabiting a tent or a makeshift structure
- are obviously sleeping in cars, or
- indicate to those undertaking the count that they are homeless.⁵

Common sense guidelines were provided to those undertaking the count to assist in differentiating between campers or tourists from those who are experiencing homelessness.

Those undertaking the count were instructed not to enter any premises, such as squats, or temporary structures to count the number of people living there. They were also instructed to avoid waking or otherwise disturbing people who were sleeping.

Where those undertaking the count could not accurately make out the number of people in a car or a tent, they were advised to count this as a single person.

Locations where there was evidence of street homelessness (such as makeshift camps, sleeping bags or personal belongings) but no people were seen are also recorded. These

⁵ Advice was provided to street count participants on how to identify themselves in the event they were approached during the street count. While the purpose of the street count is not to provide direct housing support to people street sleeping during the count, participants were provided with Link2Home cards that they could provide to people requiring housing assistance if the event they were approached by someone requiring housing assistance.

locations are not included in the 2021 street count number, but will allow outreach teams to revisit these locations in case people who require support return at a later date.

How were the locations identified?

Each DCJ District and Community Housing Provider in Social Housing Management Transfer sites were tasked with planning and coordinating street counts in their relevant areas.

Planning for the NSW 2021 street counts commenced in October 2020. Planning was undertaken in partnership with local stakeholders including Specialist Homelessness Services, local councils, Local Health Districts, Aboriginal Organisations and Police.

The number of LGAs covered during the 2021 street counts was slightly lower than in 2020. Street counts took place in 71 LGAs, compared to 79 in 2020. This is due to changes in street homelessness hot spots since last year's count. Street homelessness hotspots are not static and change over time. DCJ reviewed the 2020 street count results and took advice from Assertive Outreach teams, local service providers and stakeholders in determining which LGAs to cover. Based on this advice the following locations where street counts took place in 2020 were excluded from the 2021 street count:

- Mid-Western
- Wollondilly
- Deniliquin
- Leeton
- Snowy Valleys
- Inverell
- Moree Plains
- Glen Innes
- Edward River
- Gunnedah
- Wingecarribee

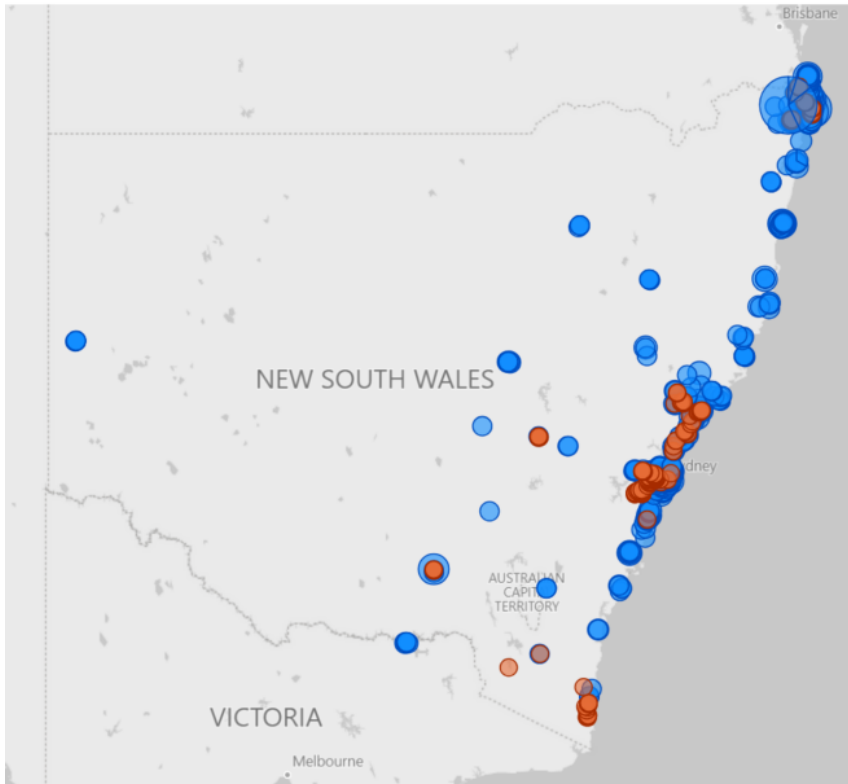
The following LGAs were also added for the 2021 street count:

- Ku-ring-gai
- Nambucca Shire
- Georges River
- Canada Bay
- Snowy Monaro

In addition, street counts were planned for Wentworth Shire and Temora, however these counts were unable to proceed as a result of a shortage of participants due to the Victorian lock-down which was in place at the time the counts were scheduled.

Street counts were conducted in 289 towns or suburbs across these 71 LGAs, which is an increase from 2020 where 267 towns or suburbs were counted.

The following map shows all locations where people were counted, as well as locations where there was evidence of street homelessness but no persons present.



People found street sleeping ● 0 ● 1

When did the count take place?

Street counts were completed between 2 February and 1 March 2021. The majority of counts took place in the morning, where 62% were scheduled between 3:30am to 7:00am, with the remaining 38% occurring at night between 10:30pm and 3:00am.

Who participated?

Over 150 local organisations partnered with DCJ and Community Housing Providers to plan for and deliver the 2021 NSW street counts.

Partners included local councils, Specialist Homelessness Services, Aboriginal groups, local community groups, Police and NSW Health.

How was information collected?

Results were recorded using the Survey123 App. The Department of Customer Service assisted DCJ in customising a survey in the app for the street count. Participants also recorded the results on paper back-up forms.

Significant improvements were made to the app to improve the usability and this resulted in fewer participants needing to rely on paper back-ups only and fewer data validation issues.

The data validation process involved comparing the results recorded in the app with those recorded on paper. In some cases there were discrepancies between the two which required a review with participants to determine the correct result. Where only paper was used to record a result, these results were later manually added to the app.

Findings

Comparing 2020 and 2021 street count results

Caution is advised when comparing 2020 and 2021 street count results. NSW faced unexpected and unprecedented challenges in 2020 that are likely to have impacted the way the count was conducted and the 2020 results are likely an undercount.

Events such as bushfires, floods and storms across the state are likely to have impacted street count totals in 2020. The DCJ District Groups most impacted by these events were

- Mid North Coast, New England and Northern NSW (MNCNENNSW)
- Illawarra, Shoalhaven and Southern NSW (ISSNSW)

Both Mid North Coast (MNC) and ISSNSW experienced delays with their counts due to weather safety and/or limited resources. MNC conducted their count in March 2020 and ISSNSW in April 2020.

Many regions impacted by extreme weather progressed their counts but with limited results, for example the City of Orange counted zero people street sleeping but eight locations with belongings were sighted, indicating that someone is ordinarily street sleeping in that area. This area had been impacted by severe storms at the time of the count.

The impact of COVID-19

ISSNSW District Group began their count in April 2020, when the state and federal social distancing restrictions had been implemented. As a result the 2020 count was conducted on a more limited basis than had been planned, with fewer counters able to participate in the count.

In 2021 COVID-19 restrictions were relaxed, and the 2021 counts in these locations were more extensive, involving a greater number of participants and areas visited.

It is likely this change may have affected the results recorded in Shoalhaven and Wollongong where 20 and 37 people were counted, compared to 2020 when six and 10 people were counted.

By comparison, in February 2019, 60 people were counted during a street count in Wollongong.

Improvements in street count planning, coordination and delivery

2020 was the first time the NSW Government had undertaken a statewide count of people experiencing street sleeping.

Key lessons from 2020 informed the planning, coordination and delivery of the 2021 street count:

- **Timing** – In 2021, more street counts were completed at night compared to 2020 when most counts were completed in the early morning. Counting at night is more accurate as people are more likely to be up and moving around in the morning.
- **Scheduling** – DCJ and its partners were able to schedule its counts so 18 of the 28 counts in the Sydney metropolitan area occurred on the same night. This helped reduce the risk of double counting in the event one person moved from one LGA to another. In 2020, these counts were staggered with relatively few counts occurring on the same night.
- **Locations** – Prior to the 2020 street counts, DCJ was operating Assertive Outreach street patrols in three locations, Inner-Sydney, Tweed and Newcastle. Since the 2020 counts, this has been expanded to 58 LGAs. These services provided DCJ and partners with more extensive local intelligence to draw on when selecting potential hot spots to include in the count locations.

DCJ is confident these changes have improved the accuracy of the 2021 street count results compared to the 2020 results.

Counting people in vans

One of the challenges people participating in a street count face is determining whether a person sleeping in a van is likely to be someone experiencing homelessness or a traveller. This can be particularly challenging in coastal locations where tourists and back-packers are likely to be staying.

Street count participants are provided advice on when to exclude a person sleeping in a van from the count, such as if it is clearly a rented campervan in a tourist location (such as a beachside car-park or designated camping site). However, participants are advised to exercise their judgement and err on the side of including rather than excluding a person sleeping in a van if they have any doubt.

The street count app doesn't record data on who was counted in a van specifically, but data is recorded on who was sleeping in a "form of transport" which includes cars, vans, 4WDs, etc.

In 2021, 397 people were recorded as sleeping in a form of transport in Coastal LGAs. In many locations participants noted there was an increase in the number of people sleeping in vans compared to 2020.

DCJ will be working with partners to engage with people sleeping in vans to determine whether they require housing support and whether guidance on counting people in vans needs to be updated ahead of the 2022 counts.

People at camp sites in Eurobodalla

During the street count, Eurobodalla Council notified DCJ there are some people at camp sites who have been camping for six weeks or more. DCJ is working with Eurobodalla Council and Specialist Homelessness Service Providers to assess if any of the campers require housing assistance. These campers have not been included in the street count total.

Appendix A: 2021 NSW street count results

District Group	LGA	Dates	Scheduled locations	2020 street count results	2021 street count results
Western Sydney & Nepean Blue Mountains	Parramatta	23 February	1	94	32
	Cumberland	23 February	N/A	5	7
	Blacktown	23 February	3	11	8
	Penrith	23 February	2	13	10
	Total		6	123	57
Sydney, South Eastern Sydney, Northern Sydney	North Sydney	9 February	2	4	7
	Bayside	15 February	7	12	4
	Willoughby	16 February	1	3	5
	City of Sydney	22 February	23	334	272
	Inner West	22 February	8	25	15
	Burwood	22 February	2	4	3
	Canada Bay	22 February	1	Not counted	2
	Canterbury/ Bankstown	22 February	8	9	7
	Strathfield	22 February	3	3	1
	Waverly	22 February	3	18	14
	Woollahra	22 February	2	4	3
	Randwick	22 February	3	6	11
	Sutherland Shire	22 February	8	33	19
	Georges River	22 February	1	Not counted	2
	Ryde	22 February	6	2	2
Northern Beaches	22 February	10	71	57	

	Hornsby	1 March	4	2	6
	Ku-ring-gai	1 March	N/A	Not counted	1
	Total		92	530	431
South Western Sydney	Camden	24 February	3	1	0
	Campbelltown	24 February	9	10	0
	Fairfield	24 February	6	7	15
	Liverpool	24 February	5	7	9
	Total		23	25	24
Murrumbidgee, Far West, Western NSW	Broken Hill	16 February	1	3	5
	Bathurst	16 February	1	4	2
	Orange	16 February	1	0	1
	Dubbo	16 February	1	4	8
	Parkes	16 February	1	1	1
	Albury	16 February	1	2	7
	Cootamundra	16 February	1	1	0
	Griffith	16 February	1	4	0
	Wagga Wagga	16 February	1	1	9
	Narrandera	16 February	1	Not Counted	0
	Hilltops	16 February	1	3	1
	Total		11	24	34
Mid North Coast, New England, Northern NSW	Tamworth	2 February	1	6	5
	Armidale	4 February	1	0	0
	Narrabri	5 February	1	3	4
	Clarence Valley	17 February	4	7	17
	Coffs Harbour	17 February	1	51	43
	Richmond Valley	17 February	3	3	3
	Kyogle	19 February	1	0	1

	Ballina	19 February	3	21	20
	Tweed Valley	22 February	5	77	58
	Nambucca	23 February	1	Not counted	0
	Macleay Valley	23 February	1	3	7
	Hastings	23 February	2	5	10
	Lismore	23 February	3	55	48
	Mid-Coast	24 February	4	2	11
	Byron Bay	25 February	4	174	198
	Total		35	407	425
Hunter, Central Coast	Newcastle	4 February	11	52	19
	Lake Macquarie	4 February	15	33	18
	Central Coast	11 February	25	58	27
	Upper Hunter	18 February	6	2	5
	Muswellbrook	18 February	3	0	0
	Singleton	18 February	3	3	0
	Dungog	18 February	3	7	7
	Cessnock	18 February	4	7	8
	Port Stephens	25 February	7	4	12
	Maitland	25 February	8	12	3
	Total		85	178	99
Illawarra Shoalhaven, Southern NSW	Eurobodalla	17 February	3	0	3
	Bega Valley	17 February	6	5	4
	Shoalhaven	17 February	4	6	20
	Snowy Monaro	17 February	3	Not counted	1
	Goulburn Mulwaree	24 February	1	0	0
	Wollongong	24 February	9	10	37



	Shellharbour	24 February	9	1	2
	Kiama	24 February	1	4	1
	Queanbeyan Palerang	24 February	1	1	3
	Total		37	27	71
NSW	Total		289	1314	1141