

NSW Statewide Street Count 2020

Summary

- From February to April 2020, the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) led the first Statewide Street Count of people experiencing street homelessness in NSW.
- Approximately 500 people participated in undertaking the counts, including from DCJ, local councils and non-government service providers. The approach to the Statewide Street Count was based on the City of Sydney bi-annual street count which occurs in February and August.
- In planning for the counts, more than 250 suburbs and townships known to be used by people experiencing street homelessness were identified through consultation with local stakeholders. These locations were identified in every DCJ District Group and across 65 local government areas.
- Participants were provided with training on how to undertake the count and used a combination of paper forms and an ARCGIS Survey123 app to record the results.
- A total of 1,314 people who appeared to be experiencing street homelessness were observed in the Statewide Street Count.
- These results have informed the expansion of assertive outreach approaches to at least 36 local government areas across NSW from March 2020. This builds on the successful Homeless Outreach Support Team model that has been operating in inner-city Sydney since 2017 and the expansion of assertive outreach to Newcastle and Tweed in 2019.

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.

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.

The ABS data is only available every five years and will not be available in the target year of 2025. To have more timely and frequent data to monitor progress and inform responses, the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) is undertaking an annual Statewide Street Count. The results are not directly comparable to the ABS homelessness estimates.²

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](#).



About the Statewide Street Count

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.

A street count has been used in the City of Sydney since 2008 and there are examples of street counts being used in other parts of NSW (such as Inner West, Parramatta and Byron Shire councils), in Melbourne and Adelaide, and in other countries.³

These types of counts vary in methodology across regions, states and countries, but are all consistent in their focus of establishing a baseline and/or monitoring the number of people experiencing street homelessness in their designated counting areas. A baseline is important to establish the extent of street homelessness in a particular region and to help inform policy and track progress.

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, however some level of judgment is required.

The approach used in the Statewide Street Count was based on the City of Sydney street count, which 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.⁴

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.

³ [City of Sydney, Street Count results](#)

⁴ [City of Sydney, Street Count Volunteer Manual](#)

How were the locations identified?

Local planning for the street counts started in August 2019. Recognising the significant regional variation in patterns of street homelessness and availability of resources and support, each DCJ District was tasked with preparing for and undertaking their own count.

The approach to planning for the counts varied by location but was generally undertaken in partnership with local councils and service providers, as well as in consultation with Aboriginal groups and people experiencing street homelessness as well as police, to maximise accuracy and sensitivity.

Locations were also informed by estimates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics on the number of people living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out from the 2016 Census, noting that this data was several years old.

A total of 296 townships and suburbs were identified for potential street counts during the planning stage. These locations were identified in every DCJ District and across 65 local government areas. An overview of the locations is provided at [Attachment A – Statewide Street Count 2020 Results](#). The total number of townships and suburbs was refined prior to the count based on changing local intelligence, and in the final counts 264 townships and suburbs were covered.



Bubbles in yellow - signs of street sleeping, but no people were spotted

Bubbles in purple - people found street sleeping



When were the counts undertaken?

The counts were planned to be undertaken from February 2020. Due to the impact of bushfires and floods in parts of NSW, counts in some areas were postponed to April 2020.

Information about the timing of the counts in each location is provided at [Attachment A – Statewide Street Count 2020 Results](#).

How were the counts conducted?

All Districts used a head-count methodology in which groups of participants went out late at night or early in the morning to count the number of people they observed who were street sleeping.

Most Districts did not interact with people street sleeping during the count, however some locations chose to also use the Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritisation Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) and/or offer housing support to the individual alongside an observational head count during the same month.

Street count data was collected using ArcGIS's Survey123 mobile app. The Department of Customer Service (DCS) developed a custom GPS enabled street count survey which was distributed to participants. To ensure the integrity of the data collected, participants were also asked to record a tally of the number of people sighted, and paper-based back-ups of all the street count entries where they could not utilize the app.

What information was collected?

Participants recorded the location of where people appeared to be street sleeping, the number of people at that location, type of dwelling, and whether they had pets. 1,314 people were counted across NSW.

Approximately 44 per cent of those counted were sleeping in open spaces and 36 per cent were in vehicles. Another nine per cent were in public roofed spaces and 11 per cent were in makeshift dwellings. This data is not available for the 334 people experiencing street homelessness in the City of Sydney.

For the 2020 Statewide Street Count, data is being published on the total number of people counted by Local Government Area.

Street count participants recorded 135 locations where there was evidence of street homelessness (such as makeshift camps, sleeping bags or personal belongings) but no people were seen. These locations were noted to be checked by Assertive Outreach teams in the future. This figure is not included in the 2020 street count number, but will allow Assertive Outreach teams to revisit these locations in case people who require support return to these locations.

Challenges and opportunities

This was the first time DCJ had undertaken a statewide count of people experiencing street sleeping. It is intended that the counts will be undertaken annually and that future counts will benefit from the lessons from this initial count. NSW has also faced unexpected and unprecedented challenges in 2020 that have impacted the way the count was conducted.

Planning

In Moree, following feedback from local Aboriginal stakeholders, it was determined that additional planning was required before a street count could occur in a way that was culturally appropriate. As a result, DCJ will facilitate further consultation with local stakeholders to develop a suitable methodology, ahead of including Moree as part of the next count.

Bushfires and extreme weather events

Events such as bushfires, floods and storms across the state are likely to have impacted street count totals. 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)

In these locations people living in makeshift dwellings in bushland or dunes are likely to have moved on as a result of the extreme weather events. Under these conditions people are more inclined to seek out Temporary Accommodation or other forms of shelter (e.g. 24/7 food outlets or other sheltered areas that are not usual 'hot spots'). This may have resulted in a reduced number of people being counted. This assumption is supported anecdotally by the local homelessness sector.

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. This revised timeframe was considered more accurate and sensitive, however it is noted that seasonal change also impacts count totals. In the City of Sydney, twice annual street counts have shown a consistent pattern where the number of people experiencing street homelessness increases in summer and decreases in winter. Numbers may have declined slightly alongside temperatures in the months of March and April.

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.

COVID-19

A direct comparison point for the impact of COVID-19 on the count in ISSNSW District is observed in Wollongong. In 2019, there was a local street count which counted 60 people. In 2020 the Wollongong count only counted 10.

ISSNSW District Group began their count in April 2020, when the state and federal social distancing restrictions had been implemented. At this point in time, DCJ had already begun



responding to people experiencing street homelessness with extended TA to allow for appropriate social distancing.

This District Group reported that the count total was likely to be significantly lower as many people may have already received assistance.

Technology

Alongside some positive feedback, there were several challenges that users experienced with the app which limited its use and increased reliance on paper-based back-ups.

Feedback provided includes

- installing the app was time consuming
- the "test app" was mistaken for the operational app resulting in manual migration of data for validation
- the map feature irregularly malfunctioned resulting in incorrect location data

Most of the issues within the app appear to be as a result of user aversion – many people who were undertaking the count felt more comfortable recording on paper backups rather than using the app.

Data validation

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



Attachment A – Statewide Street Count 2020 Results

| District Group | LGA | Dates | Locations | 2020 Street count Results |
|---|------------------------------------|-----------|------------|---------------------------|
| Western Sydney, Nepean Blue Mountains | Cumberland | February | 3 | 5 |
| | Penrith | February | 3 | 13 |
| | Parramatta | February | 1 | 94 |
| | Blacktown | February | 4 | 11 |
| | Total: | | 11 | 123 |
| Sydney, South Eastern Sydney, Northern Sydney | Strathfield | February | 1 | 3 |
| | North Sydney | February | 2 | 4 |
| | Bayside | February | 3 | 12 |
| | Willoughby | February | 2 | 3 |
| | Sutherland | February | 8 | 33 |
| | Woollahra | February | 8 | 4 |
| | Waverley | February | 6 | 18 |
| | Randwick | February | 5 | 6 |
| | Northern Beaches | February | 8 | 71 |
| | Inner West | February | 9 | 25 |
| | Hornsby | February | 4 | 2 |
| | Burwood | February | 1 | 4 |
| | Ryde | February | 6 | 2 |
| | City of Sydney | February | 31 | 334 |
| | Canterbury/Bankstown (SSESNS side) | February | 1 | 4 |
| Total: | | 95 | 525 | |
| South Western Sydney | Canterbury/Bankstown (SWS side) | February | 1 | 5 |

| | | | | |
|--|-------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| | Campbelltown | February | 1 | 10 |
| | Camden | February | 1 | 1 |
| | Fairfield | February | 5 | 7 |
| | Liverpool | February | 7 | 7 |
| | Total: | | 15 | 30 |
| Murrumbidgee, Far West, Western NSW | Dareton | February | 1 | 1 |
| | Parkes | February | 1 | 1 |
| | Hilltops | February | 1 | 3 |
| | Dubbo | February | 1 | 4 |
| | Cootamundra | February | 1 | 1 |
| | Wagga Wagga | February | 1 | 1 |
| | Orange | February | 1 | 0 |
| | Narrabri | February | 1 | 3 |
| | Griffith | February | 1 | 4 |
| | Broken Hill | February | 1 | 3 |
| | Albury | February | 1 | 2 |
| | Bathurst | February | 1 | 4 |
| | Mid-Western | February | 1 | 0 |
| | Total: | | 12 | 27 |
| Mid North Coast, New England, Northern NSW | Port Macquarie | March | 1 | 5 |
| | Coffs Harbour | March | 1 | 51 |
| | Kempsey | March | 3 | 3 |
| | Tweed Heads | February | 1 | 77 |
| | Byron Shire | February | 5 | 174 |
| | Clarence Valley | February | 4 | 7 |
| | Richmond Valley Council | February | 2 | 3 |
| | Tamworth | March | 2 | 6 |
| | Taree | March | 3 | 2 |

| | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| | Lismore | February | 2 | 55 |
| | Ballina | February | 3 | 21 |
| | Total: | | 27 | 404 |
| Hunter, Central Coast | Dungog | February | 3 | 7 |
| | Upper Hunter | February | 6 | 2 |
| | Singleton | February | 3 | 3 |
| | Port Stephens | February | 7 | 4 |
| | Muswellbrook | February | 3 | 0 |
| | Maitland | February | 8 | 12 |
| | Lake Macquarie | February | 11 | 33 |
| | Newcastle | February | 12 | 52 |
| | Cessnock | February | 4 | 7 |
| | Central Coast | February | 23 | 58 |
| | Total: | | 80 | 178 |
| Illawarra Shoalhaven, Southern NSW | Wollongong | April | 11 | 10 |
| | Kiama | April | 1 | 4 |
| | Shellharbour | April | 5 | 1 |
| | Queanbeyan | April | 1 | 1 |
| | Bega Shire | April | 5 | 5 |
| | Eurobodalla Shire | April | 6 | 0 |
| | Shoalhaven | April | 9 | 6 |
| | Goulburn | April | 1 | 0 |
| | Total: | | 39 | 27 |
| NSW | Total | | 264 | 1,314 |