
THE NEPEAN STREET COUNT

Report

By Eamon Waterford

BACKGROUND

On the 3rd/4th of May, from 11pm – 3:30am, a point-in-time street count was conducted in the Nepean region. The Nepean region spans the Blacktown, Penrith, Hawkesbury and Blue Mountains Local Government Areas. 189 volunteers participated in counting a total of 503 people sleeping rough or in government funded homelessness accommodation . An additional figure of 190 people were counted in a particular tourist location that is well- known for accommodating people otherwise facing rough sleeping or chronic homelessness (not holiday makers). Using Census definitions these 190 people would be classified as tertiary homeless but organizers have taken the step of highlighting this specific site due to its particular local characteristics. (See Appendix 1 for more detail) individuals classified as homeless in the Nepean Region.

This count was initiated by the Regional Taskforce on Homelessness (incorporating Blacktown, Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury and Penrith) and undertaken in partnership with the four local Councils and the *Nepean Campaign Against Homelessness* (NCAH) services. A Street Count Coordination Group oversaw the count which included representatives from the four local councils, NCAH services and Penrith Good Guys.

The aim of the count was to gain initial information on the extent and nature of rough sleeping across the region and to develop a baseline count figure which will be used to measure the success of the future regional homelessness responses.

PROCEDURES

The Nepean Street Count in essence was four separate counts in the four local areas. Coordinated centrally, on the night of the count each local area ran an independent count using centrally designed procedures.

Recruitment of volunteers

Using various methods, over 189 volunteers were recruited from across the region. Methods used included promotion through community networks, church groups and via the www.ncah.org website. Each volunteer registered and provided contact details, details of the area they would like to participate in and any organisational affiliation.

Recruitment of advisors

Advisors for the Nepean Street Count, both current rough sleepers and those who have experienced rough sleeping but are currently housed, were instrumental in the formation of our count. Their participation was two-fold:

- Identifying 'hot-spots' where rough sleepers were known to reside: this formed the basis of our mapping.
- Participating as support during the count. Advisors walked with teams in all areas identified as requiring counting assistance.

The participation of Advisors was based on trust relationships built up with a small handful of workers, following Advisors' initial connection with our Advisor Coordinators: Ken Hamilton and Trevor Clarke. The fact that both Ken and Trevor were currently and had been, experiencing homelessness as rough sleepers themselves, was essential in ensuring that local rough sleepers made that initial connection. This would not have occurred otherwise.

A key learning from the Street Count preparations was that people sleeping rough in the area were disconnected from workers and the service system, except for their attendance at community kitchens and meal services. The trust relationships with workers were difficult to form and easily lost, as is evidenced by three Hawkesbury advisors who received training a week before the count but did not participate on the night, as a result of not having been contacted over the weekend prior to the street count.

Mapping

Mapping of the areas for volunteers to walk was conducted using data collected from Advisors and from services. As the Nepean region contains large geographical areas which contain either little urban development or simply residential development, it was impractical to count the entirety of the area. In addition, the numbers of volunteers available limited the area we could count. Thus deciding where to count was key. With the support and assistance of Advisors, we built maps detailing the areas known to have rough sleepers in accessible areas. Local Advisors helped identify areas known to them as places where rough sleepers were residing. Once an area had been identified by an advisor, we sought to have it verified by a second separate

Advisor or a homelessness service including the meals vans/ services. From this, we built a database of 'hot-spots' for rough sleeping, which we could analyze regularly based on the strength of the sighting, allowing for early identification of 'hot-spots' lacking verification. In addition to this, we had a number of rough sleepers who proactively went out to form connections with local rough sleepers in areas we had no contact in, collecting additional data which proved vital in the identification of a number of areas that would have otherwise been missed. In particular, Ken Hamilton mapped the entire Blacktown area and we were reliant on his expertise, as the intelligence we had received from services was found to be outdated.

Training

All participants in the Nepean Street Count received training to ensure that logistical procedures were followed across the region, and that safety procedures were followed. Given that some areas identified as where rough sleepers were staying often had risks associated with them, a full safety briefing was conducted with everyone who was counting on the night. This training was held in a number of formats. Volunteers either attended one of two training sessions held in the week prior to the count, or if they could not attend, a training session held in the hour prior to the count. All Team Leaders received additional training, detailing their roles as the safety coordinator of their team and their role as liaison with their team's rough sleeping advisor. Advisors received informal training, which covered the same issues and topics, but was held in a setting that was familiar and comfortable for them.

Head Quarters

Each area count was conducted from a Head Quarters, which was situated in the Local Council building. Each of the four HQ's was coordinated by a representative of Council. In addition to this HQ coordinator, a representative from the coordination group coordinated the training, allocation and safety of volunteers. This allowed for efficient division of work. On the night of the count, there was minimal communication between HQs, but parity in methodology was ensured through detailed running sheets and an established communication plan.

Count techniques

Volunteers in counting teams were provided with a map their counting area and count forms to register every sighting they took. There was an overestimate in the distance to be covered, which resulted in a number of teams completing their count quicker than the two hours allocated to them. This is not seen a issue, as the number of volunteers exceeded pre-count estimates, ensuring that all areas identified were covered. When a sighting was made, the combination of noting the location on the map and detailing the circumstances of the sighting

ensures we have not double-counted rough sleepers. Detailed in the count form were the following details:

- The number of rough sleepers
- Any communication between counters and rough sleepers
- Any environmental factors
- Any other factors, such as other individuals in the area

Safety

The safety of areas was also taken into account and those areas where the environment was considered to have risks, a full risk assessment was undertaken. This included:

- Risks associated with geography, such as uneven ground or weather-dependent areas.
- Risks associated with incident response, such as areas with a single entrance/exit or areas away from main roads that would make responses in an emergency slow.
- Risks associated with security of volunteers, where there may be individuals who would cause incidents.

As a result of our risk assessment, we instituted a number of safety precautions. For the Mt Druitt and Blacktown walking areas, Blacktown council employed security personnel who were in 2-way radio contact with walking teams and patrolled the areas in a vehicle.

In some areas where we were concerned with safety, the number of volunteers in a team was increased to assure safety in numbers.

During the compulsory training session, every volunteer, team leader and advisor received comprehensive safety training. This training was based on the training designed by the University of Western Sydney, which had conducted its own risk assessment for the Parramatta Street Count and covered a majority of the issues facing our count. For safety issues unique to the Nepean, such as procedures to deal with semi-rural areas, additional training material was produced and designed to satisfy the Risk Assessment manager and Insurer of each Local Council.

If these procedures could not mitigate the safety risks of an area, the area was not counted by volunteers.

Where there was a known hotspot that was considered unsafe for volunteers to count, we used a trained Advisor/s with expert knowledge of the area to undertake a count on May 4th.

Informal surveys were conducted at the hotspot in the weeks leading up to the Count to ensure maximum verification of the numbers counted on May 4th.

In a number of instances, notably the caves of the Blue Mountains, estimates were taken in the weeks leading up to the Count by Advisors and rough sleepers from the hotspots in consultation with Street Count organizers.. However, on the night of the Count, May 4th, the 'caves' Advisors were absent for a number of reasons and therefore no Count was conducted of those hotspots. This needs to be taken into consideration for the next regional Street Count.

In the case of a tourist location well known by the service system and rough sleepers alike, as a place where many rough sleepers camped, the Advisor conducted a number of head counts in the weeks leading up to the official Count in preparation. The number counted on May 4th at this location was very high with organizers believing that this number is valid, however it is presented separately in the figures counted. The nature of the site means that it will be classified as a counting of people experiencing tertiary homelessness on May 4th, although we have positively identified many people who would otherwise be sleeping rough as being temporarily accommodated at the site. More details will be provided in discussion with the Regional Taskforce but not in public documents due to issues and sensitivities around the site. It is believed by organizers that there is merit in presenting information on this site alongside the rough sleeping Count total, although the Count's key purpose is to count rough sleepers, not those in secondary or tertiary homelessness.

COUNT EXPERIENCES

The feedback received from Volunteers was overwhelmingly positive. Following are several examples:

'What an experience. So sad but also so uplifting, the tenacity of the human spirit is amazing. I was lucky enough to interact with 3 of the local guides for the Penrith area ranging in age from "19 next month" to late 30's to mid 40's. They all had stories to tell of lives in chaos and how they ended up on the streets, all stories were told with a laugh, a joke and a shrug of the shoulders. By the end of the two hours we were all looking at the local area in a different light, some may have thought we were looking for our own little spot of real estate hidden in trees and by the river as we knew from our guide what people look for when camping out. A big thank you to the guides for sharing their experiences with us, answering what may at times have seemed to them like stupid questions and having a laugh with us. A really great bunch of blokes.'

A Penrith Volunteer

'Well done to you and the others at the organisational level. It is fantastic (and somewhat emotional) to know that the people counted have been noticed. Until this point they have been somewhat "invisible".'

Again, well done. ‘

A Blacktown Volunteer.

CHALLENGES OF THE NEPEAN REGION

We are grateful for the advice and support of the Cities of Sydney and Parramatta, who have respectively undertaken Street Counts. There have been changes to the methodology used in the Nepean/Blacktown region in line with its differing geographic characteristics and circumstances. .

Rural & Bushland Geography

The Nepean region and Blacktown LGA is of significant size, but has a much lower population density than urban areas. The area counted spans the urban centres of Penrith & Blacktown to rural areas of the Hawkesbury and small semi-rural townships in the Blue Mountains. The larger geographical area has resulted in poor public transport links, which are centralised around a regional train line in the remote areas. This has resulted in many rough sleepers residing within walking distance of public transport but still in a rural or bushland setting. For example, in many areas of the Nepean, it is common for rough sleepers to camp in bushland whilst remaining within 10 minutes walking distance of a train station. These rough sleepers resided outside of count areas, as the safety of these areas could not be assured.

To mitigate this concern, we relied on the count of these areas by experienced Advisors. This method highlighted the need for connection and trust relationships between rough sleepers and organizers/ services, as areas where these relationships were strong received a much larger participation of Advisors than in the areas where we were not aware or had no contacts with those sleeping in rural or bushland locations.

Squat dwellers

In the urban areas of the Nepean region, a number of squats have been identified, but anecdotal evidence suggests a significantly larger number of people sleeping in squat accommodation than we are aware of. As safety was a concern for volunteers on the night of the Nepean Street Count, volunteers were unable to count or even estimate numbers in squats, which is a standard adopted by the City of Sydney and Parramatta City when undertaking their Count.. it is

recommended that an alternative method of counting squat dwellers be established, as no effective method currently exists.

Seasonal Temperatures

As we ran our count in the beginning of May, the seasonal temperature will have been a factor in the numbers counted rough sleeping. While the count was initially scheduled for February, a lack dedicated resources forced a delay in the count. Whereas February is relatively mild, by May there are many areas where temperatures drop below 6⁰C during the night. This may have had the effect of moving rough sleepers off the street and into squats and unsuitable housing, or into regions where the climate is milder.

Relationship with authority organisations

The relationship between rough sleepers & authority organisations¹ could be described as one where there is little to no trust of these organisations by rough sleepers. This raises multiple issues.

- Primarily, it has resulted in the moving of rough sleepers from central, visible areas to marginal or dangerous areas to avoid detection or being moved on. In one instance during the street count, a rough sleeper known to the coordination group living on the edge of bushland chose to hide deeper in the bush when he sighted a group of volunteers approaching his campsite, believing them to be from an authority organisation.
- On the night of the count, those rough sleepers who remained on the street experienced a level of scrutiny and conflict with authority organisations, with an incident of rough sleepers being moved on being reported to volunteers by police and another incident where rough sleepers being moved on by police was witnessed by a group of volunteers. Incidents with police were reported by Volunteers in the Penrith and Blue Mountains areas, whilst incidents with private security personnel (not connected with the Count) were reported in the Blacktown area.
- From the perspective of rough sleepers, authority organisations often got linked to each other, such that rough sleepers were suspicious of those working with the Nepean Street Count based on past experiences with other, unrelated organisations.

Lack of dedicated outreach/street workers

¹ By Authority organisations, primarily this refers to the Police, although Council Rangers, Private Security & other street-level workers.

While our methodology relied heavily on the support and skills of rough sleeping Advisors, the Nepean region does not have a single dedicated outreach/street worker in the homelessness sector employed to connect with rough sleepers.. As such, the relationships built up with rough sleepers did not have access to the resources it is believed necessary to truly establish a connection between rough sleepers and the service system as a whole.

COUNT METHODOLOGY

The final count number is drawn from a number of sources.

- Count by volunteers: Groups of volunteers counted the number of rough sleepers sighted, including a count of one for any cars with evidence of habitation. While this number may be conservative as a result, it ensures 100% certainty in the numbers.
- A count of numbers from government funded homelessness accommodation & some hospitals: These numbers were gathered the following day by contacting each service, which is required to keep a count of the number they housed the previous night.
- Advisor’s expert knowledge of areas deemed too dangerous for volunteers to walk: In areas such as these, we asked trained Advisors to survey the hotspots prior to the count in preparation for the Count which provided us with both an initial estimate to help validate the official Count undertaken on May 4th. The number counted on May 4th was the only total used – in a number of cases Advisors were absent on May 4th so absolutely no data was submitted for that area.
- A tourist location within the semi-rural parts of the region has been known to services and authorities as a place providing temporary shelter for residents that many would deem unsuitable. “If people lack access to the basic amenities that a home normally affords, then people living in that situation should rightly be classified as homeless”². It could be asked, does the housing provided at that site:
 - Damage, or is likely to damage, their health;
 - Threaten their safety;
 - Marginalise them through failing to provide access to adequate personal amenities
 - Place them in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security, affordability of that housing

² Homelessness Australia; 2006; Counting the Homeless: Review of the Methodology; Pg. 3; Available Online:

<http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/UserFiles/File/Submission%20to%20Counting%20the%20Homeless%20Review.pdf> (Last Viewed 13/05/10)

These factors are each classification for homelessness as defined by The SAAP and Homelessness Australia³.

LEARNINGS FROM THE COUNT

- Improved training for volunteers in spotting rough sleepers: A number of volunteer groups sighted rough sleepers but were not aware that they had. For example, where an advisor had identified as a location where a number of rough sleepers were staying, volunteers sighted two people sitting, but did not count them as they did have the appearance of rough sleepers, which is entirely possible as many rough sleepers will not conform to the stereotypical appearance. This was illustrated to volunteers, but in the future should be reiterated, with potentially some form of photographic examples shown.
- Relationship building with advisors needs to be over a longer period: While the count could not have occurred without the efforts of a number of workers who made contacts with rough sleepers in the months prior to the count, there needs to be longer build-up periods of communication with rough sleepers, many of whom have not had positive interactions with government/community organisations in the past, and thus require extended communication periods to ensure there is trust built up.
- Safety vs. too many volunteers in a group: In some areas, we had groups of up to eight, with one area having a group of twelve. The larger numbers were to ensure safety for walking teams, but this did not take the negatives of having large groups into account enough. For example, in a particular area, a rough sleeper retreated into bushland as a large group walking up to the area where he was sleeping was too loud and large, which was intimidating to him.
- In addition to these sources, we had additional numbers from sources that should be noted. Note; these numbers *are not included* in our final count, but point to additional groups of rough sleepers we could not factor in under our strict methodology:
 - A count of three was taken in an area of Penrith where a Police patrol informed a walking team they had just 'moved on' three rough sleepers. This number is considered believable as previously we had identified the location as a place where rough sleepers stay, and Police are considered a reliable source, who would underestimate rather than overestimate numbers of rough sleepers.

³ Homelessness Australia; 2006; About Homelessness; Available Online: <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/site/about.php> (Last Viewed 13/05/10)

- Two people in the Blacktown area were not identified as rough sleepers by the walking team. The two were residing in a location identified by an Advisor as where rough sleepers stay, but were not identified by the walking team. These individuals were sighted at 2:30am, and the likelihood is that they were rough sleeping.

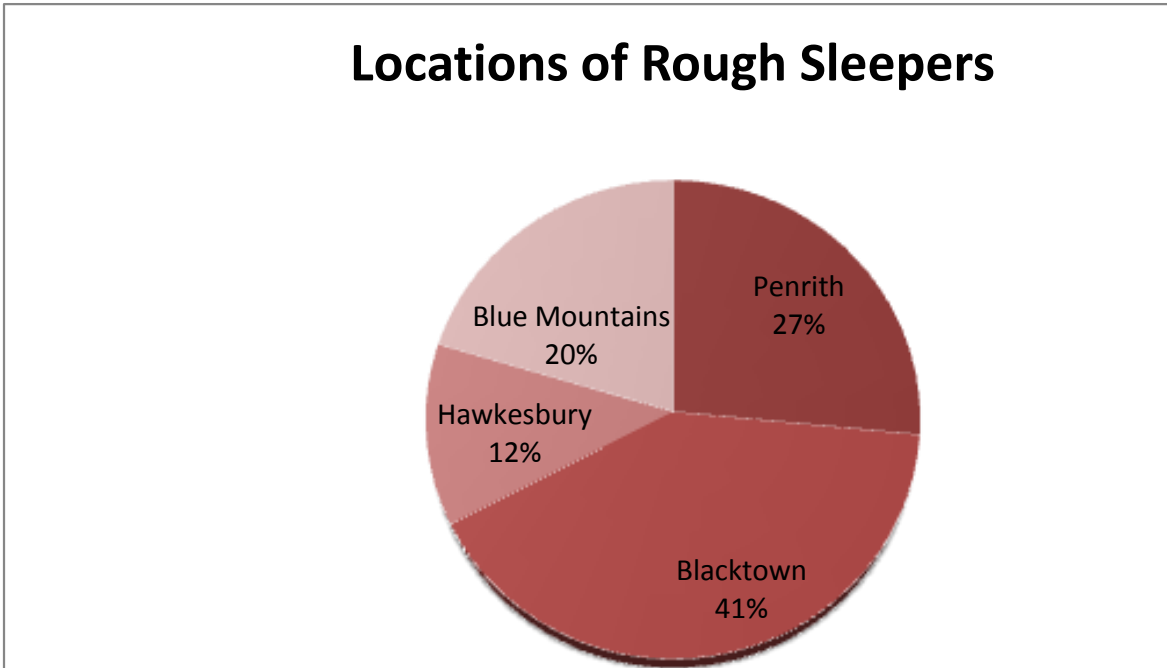
CONCLUSIONS

Based on the numbers counted and the methods in which these numbers were sourced, it has been concluded that the Nepean and Blacktown region faces challenges in accessing and counting the rough sleepers in the region. This issue is based on numerous unique environmental and social factors:

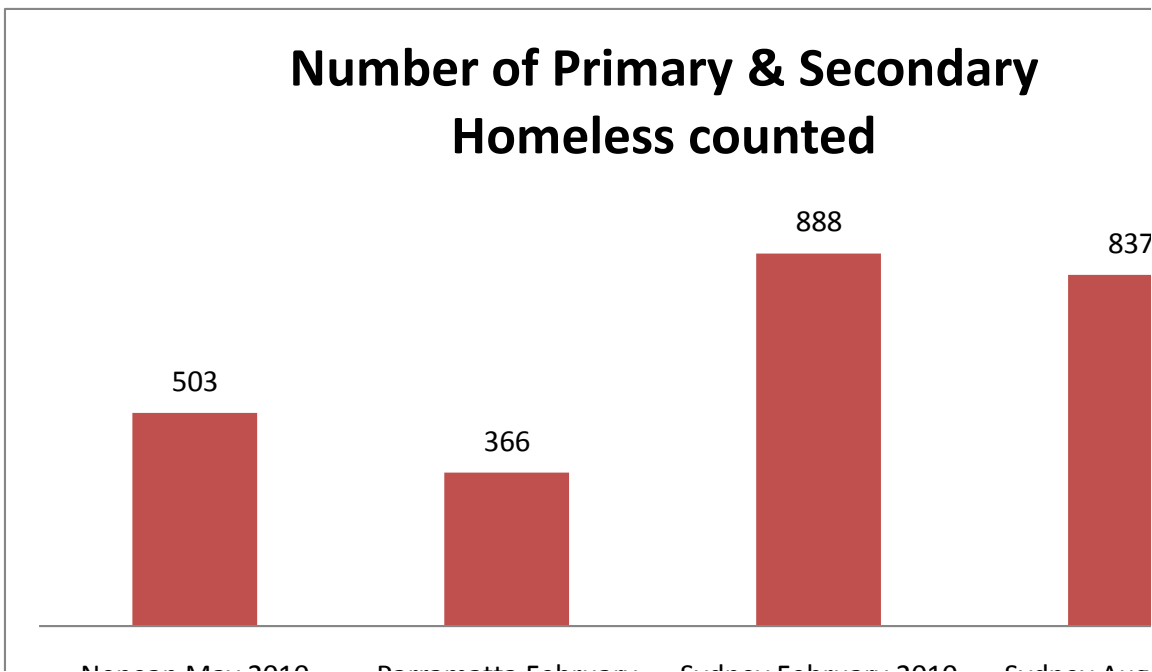
- Rough Sleeper’s relationship with authority organisations is poor.
- The environment of the Nepean region ranges from urban centres to semi-rural villages to rural towns, resulting in a disparate homeless community, ranging from squat dwellings to rough sleepers living in tents in bushland.

The Nepean lacks the dedicated outreach/ street work resource of other areas.

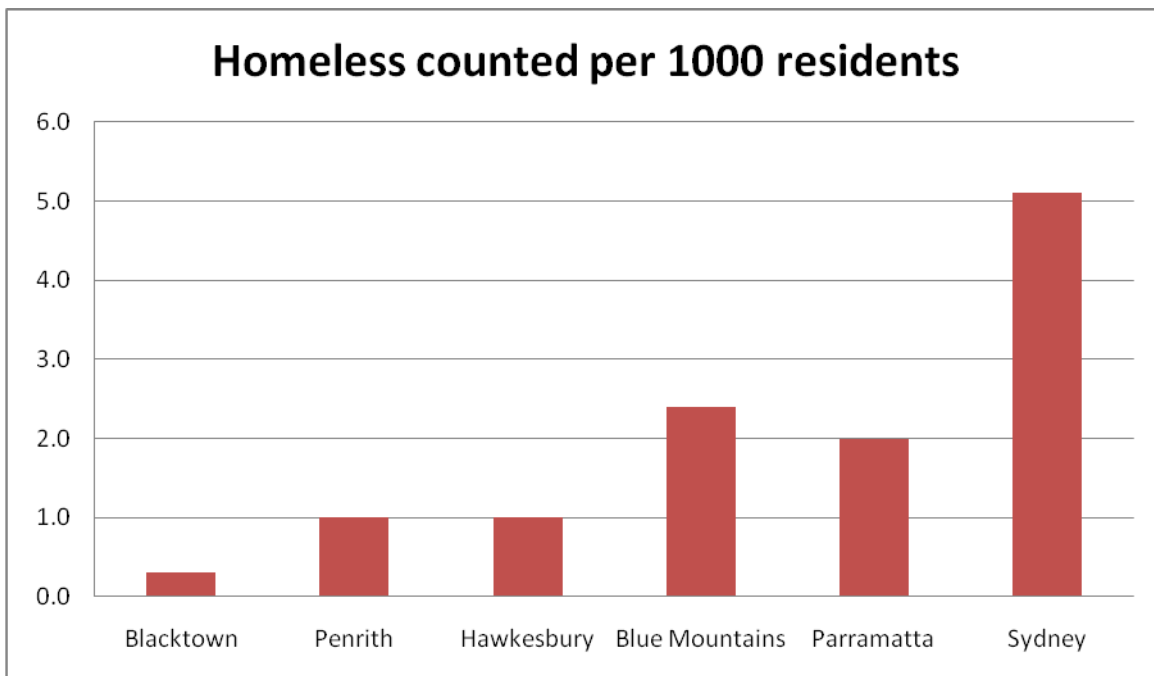
Appendix 1: Locations of Rough Sleepers



Appendix 2:



Appendix 3: Per-Capita comparison



Appendix 4: Proportion of homeless in primary/secondary homelessness

