

2013 Cambridge Homeless Census

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The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requires communities across the country to conduct an annual census of individuals and families experiencing homelessness during the last ten days of January. The census includes a count of unsheltered individuals, and a count of sheltered and transitionally housed families and individuals. Municipal and program staff completed the count of individuals and families staying in emergency shelters and transitional housing during the night between Jan. 30-31, 2013. During the same night, the cities of Cambridge and Somerville jointly carried out the unsheltered portion of the census. Cambridge counted 537 persons experiencing homelessness:

- 69 individuals sleeping outdoors or in places not meant for human habitation;
- 2 individuals in hospitals;
- 203 individuals staying in emergency shelters;
- 92 individuals residing in transitional housing;
- 26 families staying in emergency shelters (61 persons); and
- 35 families residing in transitional housing (110 persons).

The 2013 census total of 366 individuals shows a slight increase (less than 3 percent) over the 2012 count of 357 individuals. The 2013 count of persons in families increased compared to the 2012 count solely because a transitional program that was not previously included in the count was added. This program reported 14 families with 53 persons, which accounts for the increase in transitionally housed families (35 families in 2013 compared to 21 families in 2012) and the increase in the overall count of persons experiencing homelessness (537 in 2013 compared to 485 in 2012).

Six teams of volunteers followed a series of prescribed routes through the two cities during the pre-dawn hours to complete the unsheltered count. The teams included Cambridge and Somerville residents, students from Harvard University, staff from homeless service providers, the Cambridge Police Department and the Cambridge Department of Human Services staff. The teams were led primarily by street outreach workers from CASPAR's First Step Street Outreach program, with radio and emergency backup from Professional Ambulance and Cambridge Multi-Service Center staff. As they completed the count, teams offered individuals transportation to shelters, and distributed sandwiches made by City staff with supplies donated by Whole Foods River Street, fleece scarves made and donated by Many Helping Hands and hand-knit winter hats made by the knitting group at the North Cambridge Senior Center.

Historical trends show that when it is warmer outside, street counts go up and sheltered counts go down, and that when it is very cold and stormy outside, street counts go down and sheltered counts go up. This year's census night was both unseasonably warm (50 degrees) and stormy – a combination of the different conditions that generally indicate whether street counts will be high or low compared to past years. The 2013 census showed slight increases in both the sheltered and unsheltered count; the count of unsheltered individuals was 69, three more than in 2012, and the count of individuals in emergency shelter was 203, eleven more than in 2012.

"The census data does not capture some significant facts about the City's homeless services and approach to preventing and ending homelessness," said Assistant City Manager for Human Services Ellen Semonoff. "Cambridge prioritizes the development and maintenance of funding for Permanent Supportive Housing (housing with supportive services available) for formerly homeless persons. On the night of the census, 424 formerly homeless persons (individuals and persons in families) were living in permanent supportive housing. Over 40 percent of those persons were chronically homeless upon entry into permanent housing, an indicator of the progress we've made in addressing housing and supportive service needs for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. However, the sheltered and unsheltered counts confirm that the City and our partners still have much work to do to prevent and eliminate homelessness in our community, region and country as a whole."