Echo Park Homelessness May Have Risen Less Than It Seems

Louis Abramson, PhD, for the *SELAH Neighborhood Homeless Coalition*

February 22, 2021

Summary: The number of tents near Echo Park Lake increased by over 100% between January and October 2020. However, the total number of unsheltered *people* rose less dramatically. *SELAH* data suggest that between 175 and 220 individuals lived exposed or in ∼150 informal dwellings in census tract 1975.00 as of last fall. Compared to the official LAHSA Point-In-Time (PIT) Count of 174 people, our preferred value of ∼190 residents would reflect a ∼9% increase. While substantial, this modest rise reflects known COVID-related tent distribution efforts by local service providers, and is consistent with evidence suggesting that tent occupancy is down by perhaps 30% compared to the last SPA4 estimates. More definitive statements are difficult, but our analysis suggests that, at a minimum, surveys establishing the fraction of tents not employed as dwellings will be key to obtaining an accurate assessment of today's unsheltered population.

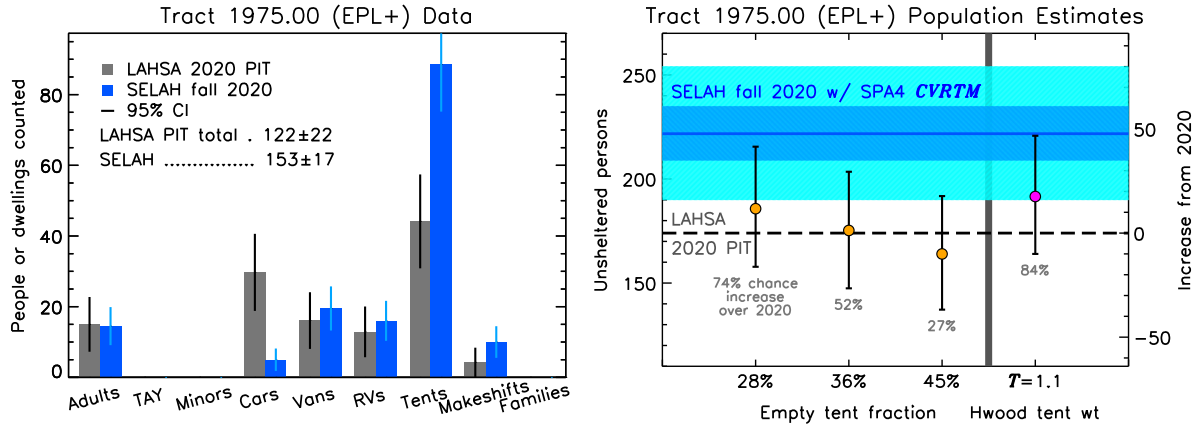

Figure 1: *Left: SELAH*'s recounts from fall 2020 (blue) compared to LAHSA PIT values from last January (grey). Car counts have fallen, but the 110% rise in tents has a larger impact on the population. *Right:* combined with the official SPA4 2020 weights, *SELAH*'s data imply 220 ± 30 unsheltered people living near Echo Park lake (blue horizontal line + bands; 90% CI)—25% more than 2020's official tally (horizontal dashes). However, *SELAH* outreach teams subsequently found $37\% \pm 9\%$ of tents to be unused for dwelling, implying a reduced rise of $\lesssim$10% (yellow circles). That value is consistent with estimates obtained by assuming tent occupancies derived from data in Hollywood from 2021 (pink circle; $T = 1.1$ people per tent). Estimates derived from the SPA4 weights ($T = 1.45$ people per tent) may therefore be closer to current upper limits. Percentages below each inference give the chance that the unsheltered population increased compared to 2020.

Table 1: Tract 1975.00 Unsheltered Data

	Adult	TAY	Unacc Minor	Car	Van	RV	Tent	Makeshift	Family	**Total**
LAHSA Jan 2020 Counts	15	–	–	30	16	13	44	4	–	**122**
SELAH Fall 2020 Counts	14	0	0	5	19	16	88	10	0	**153**

Counts are of objects and do not account for CVRTM weights. All entries combined into LAHSA's "Persons on the street" category are listed as adults. *SELAH* quantities reflect the average of survey results from 2 August and 18 October circa 11:00 AM.

Context: *SELAH*'s outreach teams performed two recounts of US Census tract 1975.00 on 2 August and 18 October 2020 (Figure 2). This tract contains Echo Park Lake and various CalTrans lands. The results of both surveys were statistically identical except for the estimate of vans, which rose from 14 ± 3 to 25 ± 5 between counts. Our final individual/dwelling statistics (Table 1) and total population estimates (Figure 1) reflect the average of those assessments.

Figure 2: US Census tract 1975.00.

Results and uncertainties: The population inferences in Figure 1 come from 10,000 Monte Carlo resamplings of the *SELAH* survey data with counts perturbed by random draws from their Poisson error bars. In the cases of cars, vans, RVs, tents, and makeshift (CVRTM) dwellings, we additionally boosted counts by the relevant weighting factor perturbed by its error bar. In the baseline case—shown as blue horizontal bands in Figure 1—we use the official 2020 LAHSA SPA4 CVRTM weights. The median result of that inference yields 220 ± 30 unsheltered individuals (90% CI) compared to the PIT's estimate of 174 people.

The CVRTM weights present systematic uncertainties, however, and so possible biases. For example, service providers have made a concerted effort to distribute tents during COVID, which might modulate T downwards. (Other weights may have also shifted, but the fraction of tent-dwelling is such that changes to T dominate the measurement error.) As such, multiplying by the 2020 LAHSA tent weight may result in an overestimate of the actual unsheltered population.

SELAH cannot re-measure T on large geographies, but two small-scale estimates suggest it has indeed fallen from the official 2020 value of 1.45 people per tent:

1. *SELAH* outreach teams surveyed 30 tents along Echo Park Lake's southern border on 21 February 2021, finding 11 of them to be used for storage or—based on statements from neighbors or the team's weekly experience—abandoned. Albeit small, this sampling suggests that up to 28%–45% of tents may be uninhabited (95% CI) effectively reducing T to 0.9.[1]

2. Business Improvement District surveys of Hollywood conducted biweekly since January 2020 show the number of tents to have risen there faster than the number of visible individuals. Those data imply an average tent occupancy of $T = 1.1 \pm 0.07$ people today.

Using the lower unoccupied tent fraction in (1) to allow for inhabitants simply not being home, both modifications reduce our median unsheltered estimate to about 190 people—16 more than the 2020 PIT value.

In all cases, further rigorous surveys—especially those aimed at understanding the fraction of tents not used as dwellings—are needed to ensure we understand the current scale of the homelessness crisis and plan accordingly.

[1] Note: the official CVRTM weights are established using a methodology that may not account for empty tents, and therefore may generally lead to overestimates of some degree.