This paper examines (a) the shifting logics underpinning why and how the public authorities in Algeria sought to know more about the Algiers shantytowns and their inhabitants and (b) the way these different logics impacted on the quality and accuracy of the information thus collected. My analysis will examine one particularly rich source, in the form of the first city-wide census of shantytowns in Algiers, undertaken in 1941 as the issue became politically important during the Vichy regime. This detailed census, carried out by Algiers City Council and accompanied by a map, mainly sought to calculate the re-housing needs of shantytown inhabitants, but also contained a logic of containment of shantytown growth. In both short and longer terms, such aims proved unsuccessful, and the estimated total numbers of shantytown inhabitants constituted a very sensitive political question after 1945, with several detailed studies on shantytowns by sociologists or humanitarian workers producing important quantitative and qualitative data that will also be examined. With the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962), shantytowns became a key political and security as well as social issue: henceforth, re-housing was always envisaged within a wider policy of ‘pacification’. From 1956-7 onwards, who lived where in the shantytowns was of keen interest to the French military (notably Sections administratives urbaines, SAU), as well as to the City Council and HLM (social housing) agencies. The SAU wanted to assess re-housing needs, but also stop new shacks from being built, and to know who was coming to live in shantytowns: war-time internal refugee migrations brought accelerated shantytown growth in suburban Algiers especially. If time allows, brief reference will be made to Casablanca at the end (1945-1956) of the French Protectorate for comparative purposes.