

# Census count no help to homeless

By Richard P. Appelbaum  
and Peter Dreier

When it comes to federal policy, numbers count a great deal. The 1990 census, which plans the first-ever national count of people on streets and in shelters, will help determine the funding of programs for America's rapidly-growing homeless population over the next decade.

We believe the census will severely undercount the homeless, pulling the rug out from under the few programs that presently exist. We are worried because all past efforts to accurately count the homeless have failed miserably.

The number of homeless people has become a political football. The Bush administration, like its predecessor, does not like to think of the problem as too big or too costly. Small problems require small numbers, and small numbers apparently require large studies.

Since a 1984, Department of Housing and Urban Development study placed the national homeless figure at barely one-tenth of the National Homeless Coalition's figure of 2 to 3 million, millions of dollars, dozens of studies and countless interviewers have all sought to count the homeless. All of these efforts have failed. These undercounts have made it possible for the Bush Administration to justify small-scale programs that do not address the fundamental problem.

Why are all efforts to count the homeless doomed to failure?

Part of the answer is political: a deliberate effort on the part of the federal government to downplay the seriousness of the problem through statistical sleight of hand. Although HUD's 5-year-old figures continue to provide the official federal estimate of homelessness, two Congressional hearings that examined HUD's methods in detail found these figures worthless.

Other studies have attempted to correct HUD's mistakes, without success. One study is especially important, because its methods provide a model for the upcoming HUD census. Unlike the HUD study, which relied on the opinion of "experts," the well-funded Chicago Homeless Study tried to actually count all the homeless in selected areas of the city on two early morning occasions.

The interviewers, who for security reasons included an off-duty police officer, scoured a random sample of blocks, asking the people they encountered wandering the streets if they had a place to sleep. Few were willing to talk to the interviewers, much less admit to being homeless: only 23 people on the first occasion, and 30 on the second.

These minuscule numbers were then projected to the parts of the city that were not surveyed, yielding a citywide homeless figure of only 2,000-3,000 people, considerably lower than even HUD's conservative estimate of 20,000. The prestigious Science Magazine has since uncritically reported these doubtful results, giving further credence to the belief that the homeless can be accurately counted if only enough money is spent.

That belief has led the Census Bureau to get into the act. Next March 20, on "Street and Shelter Night," census takers will fan out across the United States in an effort to secure a one-time "hard" national count of the homeless. City governments will be asked to provide the Census Bureau with a list of shelters and street locations where the homeless congregate. Census takers will briefly interview the homeless they find in the shelters. And later, in the early morning hours, count the people they encounter in the streets.

Census officials admit there are numerous obstacles

to an accurate count by this method, not the least of which is limited funding. Like all other previous attempts, the census count will be limited only to the visible homeless. The Census Bureau proposes to turn exclusively to local government officials for guesses of where they are to be found, ignoring homeless people outside the most obvious areas.

If the HUD study failed to locate numerous people while relying on shelter providers and others close to the homeless, how can the Census hope for success in relying on less well-informed government officials? Safety considerations pose another problem in counting, since census takers will be asked to avoid unsafe locations such as tunnels, cars and abandoned buildings.

The many homeless people who sleep in such places will therefore be ignored.

Finally, the street and shelter census will completely ignore those homeless people who are doubled-up with friends and relatives. The regular household census, which will be done two weeks later, will not make up for this deficiency, since many experts believe it is virtually impossible to get accurate information about illegal tenants.

While the Census Bureau admits that its count is not exhaustive, homeless advocates fear that whatever number they come up with will become the "official" number used for policy-making. In the words of the National Coalition for the Homeless, "everyone will be clamoring for the release of this 'scientific' count; as we know, anything is possible in the numbers game."

In that game, there are clear winners and losers. Researchers get large grants and build their careers as experts on homelessness. The federal government saves billions of dollars by "proving" that there really aren't all that many homeless people out there who require federal assistance. The major losers are the homeless themselves, including a growing number of the



working poor and children, who are not only denied their mere existence, but the very programs they require to survive.

In our view, the one number that really does matter is the number of dollars the federal government spends on housing assistance for the poor. That number can be easily counted. It now stands at only \$7 billion, a fifth the amount that was spent at the beginning of the decade. Today, less than one-third of America's 33 million poor people receive any kind of governmental housing assistance at all. That means that there are millions of poor people at risk of being homeless tomorrow should they be hit with a rent increase, domestic violence or a layoff.

If the Bush Administration is serious about the tragedy of homelessness, it will forget about counting the uncountable, and start putting money into housing programs until there is no need for homeless shelters.

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