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When Every Person Counts

More than numbers are at stake in L.A. County's recent homeless census

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On January 23rd, twelve hundred people fanned out through the city to make a comprehensive count of the largest population of urban homeless in the country. The results, when they're available, will hardly be a surprise to anyone living in L.A. County, but represent a serious challenge to social services here. In the last count, in 2005, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) found that, among Los Angeles County's almost 10 million inhabitants, just over 82,000 are homeless.

Consider, as a point of reference, that a 2001 report from France's National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies put the figure for the entire homeless population of France at around 86,000 people. In other words, the number of homeless in Los Angeles County is about the same as a country with 50 million more inhabitants.

The gravity of this situation led former L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan, the city council and the L.A. County Board of Supervisors to create LAHSA in 1993. The agency is charged with the distribution and oversight of federal, state, county, and city funding for all homeless services within the county. Up until the implementation of the biannual Homeless Count, however, there was no reliable way to track LAHSA's progress.

This count is required, in fact, in order to get federal dollars from HUD, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and its homeless services program. As LAHSA receives a huge majority of its funding from federal sources (over 80 percent of its 2006-2007 budget), the count became an imperative.

All this attention to the allocation of services to the homeless, however, masks one significant fact: There's just not that much money around to allocate.

Dr. Martha R. Burt of The Urban Institute notes, "Los Angeles doesn't have a budget for homelessness." Burt was contracted by LAHSA through a HUD Technical Assistance grant to help improve its methodology in time for this year's count and says the homeless just have a low priority in L.A. County politics.

"Until these past 12 months, there has literally been no county money and almost no city money for homelessness, or for shelters, or for anything else," she adds.

All of which serves to make the count that much more important. According to Homeless Count Planning Manager Clementina Verjan, before 2005 the only information on the homeless in Los Angeles came from the administrative records of individual homeless services providers. A 1994 report by Shelter Partnership, an NGO that provides technical and funding assistance to individual agencies that serve the homeless, attempted to

conglomerate service provider records into a generalized, if statistically faulty, portrait of homelessness in L.A. County. To develop the complex methodology of LAHSA's inaugural 2005 count, as well as tabulate its results, LAHSA tapped Applied Survey Research, an NGO providing technical assistance for social sciences research.

The two initial phases of the count entail volunteer and paid workers, armed with clipboards and maps of the census tracts they are assigned to cover, patrolling the streets and shelters, literally counting every homeless person they can find in their designated areas. The sheer magnitude of the task mandates that it be spread over three nights, as the one-square-mile area of downtown's Skid Row can harbor upwards of 5,000 people on any given night.

The next phase of the count is a series of in-depth surveys of several thousand homeless people (3,300 in the 2005 count), intended to provide the kind of detailed information needed to understand both the demographics and service needs of L.A. County's homeless. LAHSA caps off the count with a random digit dial (1,000 households in 2005) in an attempt to account for the "hidden homeless" - those who are technically homeless, in that they cannot afford to house themselves, but are not physically unsheltered because they can stay temporarily with friends or family.

One of the primary obstacles to counting L.A.'s homeless, according to Dr. Burt, is the enormity of Los Angeles's sprawl. With a population of almost 10 million, 88 municipalities - only 25 of which allocate any funds for homeless services - and local, city, and county agencies to account for, Burt contends that coordination around any topic this complex is nearly impossible.

Burt's analysis of the 2005 count methodology found a few problems that might change the final tallies, and when every number represents a human being in need, accuracy matters. The most glaring of these were the selection process for which of L.A. County's 1,890 census tracts would be covered in the count, and the way in which the results for the "random digit dial" surveys were reported.

Since it is very impractical for LAHSA to hand-count every single census tract in the county, they must use a mix of deliberately selected tracts with high homeless populations, and then some other randomly selected tracts that can be weighted to stand in for all the tracts LAHSA doesn't explicitly count. In the 2005 count, Burt states, "They had some places that they picked at random [in which] they actually found more people than they found in some of the certainty places. That really affects the total numbers." Similarly, she felt that surveying 1,000 households for the hidden homeless was only a tenth of what should be surveyed.

LAHSA, says Burt, has accepted most of the suggestions for improvement that she and other consultants have made. Burt believes these changes will make the 2007 count more precise, and that this precision will actually lower the number of homeless in this year's count, but adds: "I still think you have an enormous number of homeless people in Los Angeles about which very little has been done by public agencies."

L.A. County seems to be taking steps to rectify this situation. The county set aside just shy of \$100 million for homeless services in its 2006-2007 budget, in addition to establishing a new, county-level position to streamline interagency efforts to reduce homelessness:

Coordinator of Homeless and Service Enriched Housing Initiatives. At the state level, California passed the Mental Health Services Act in 2004, designed to expand and bolster public mental health services, and a \$2.85 billion statewide housing and emergency shelter bond in the November 2006 election.

Burt expresses cautious optimism for the attention the count is bringing to L.A. County's homeless, "I actually think that the first count in 2005 really woke people up, and there are way more people now that are actually concerned, at a minimum, about the image of the county and, at a maximum, about actual homelessness. So, things have actually begun to happen, a little tiny bit."