

The United States Census Effort to Count the Homeless: An Assessment of Street Enumeration Procedures During "S-Night" in New Orleans

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Abstract: "Shelter and Street Night" (S-Night) was the attempt by the U.S. Bureau of the Census to include selected components of the nation's homeless population in the 1990 decennial count. Teams of investigators in five cities were contracted by the Census's Center for Survey Methods Research (CSMR) to assist in assessing various aspects of the S-Night enumeration. Among the contracted activities, researchers independently compiled a list of the names and addresses of shelters for comparison against the bureau's existing list of S-Night shelter enumeration sites. In addition, investigators

undertook experiments concerning the completeness and reliability of the actual homeless count. This entailed the hiring, training, and supervision of approximately sixty persons deployed as observation teams to designated locations around the city. Subsequent analysis indicated that approximately two-thirds of the observers were enumerated in New Orleans. Aside from missing a third of the observers, numerous other problems were discovered in the homeless count.

Key words: Homeless; homelessness; street enumeration.

1. Introduction

Early in the 1980s, homelessness became a highly visible social problem in the United States (Wright 1989) and the question arose as to the exact number of homeless. As the problem seemed to intensify, it became increasingly apparent that the federal government would soon be forced to respond; some knowledge about the number of the homeless was necessary in order to determine the appropriate federal response.

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An earlier version of this paper was presented at the U.S. Census Bureau's Seventh Annual Research Conference in Washington, DC, 1991. The research reported here was supported by a grant from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, who bears no responsibility for the results or interpretations.

The opening salvo in the "numbers controversy" was fired in a 1983 report to the Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD 1983). Based on "informed judgment" and shelter capacity in a number of large cities, the HUD report guessed that there were some 250,000 to 350,000 homeless in the nation, a figure considerably less than the two to three *million* that was then current in advocacy circles. The HUD estimate was highly criticized by advocates and was even considered an attempt to minimize the seriousness of the homelessness problem. Indeed, Mitch Snyder, the best known of the homeless advocates, sued HUD for negligence; Snyder's numbers, in turn, were dismissed as fraudulent (see Horowitz 1989).²

This same scenario was played out in a number of specific cities, always with the same general result. Someone would undertake to count the number of homeless persons in a city; the count would produce an estimate substantially lower than that maintained by local advocates. Rossi's sophisticated effort to count the homeless in Chicago (Rossi, Wright, Fisher, and Willis 1987) turned up only about 3,000 literally homeless people; advocates in the city had been suggesting a count in the range of 12,000 to 15,000. Robinson's (1985) count in Washington DC turned up fewer than half of the "expected" number. Freeman and Hall (1986) attempted to replicate the HUD report with more recent data and concluded that "the HUD study was roughly correct." Needless to say, their conclusion met a great deal of criticism.

A moment's reflection will make plain that "the total number of the homeless" is of necessity a "soft," ambiguous number that probably cannot be known with a high degree of precision. There are, first, all the customary uncertainties inherent in the research process, the uncertainties of sampling, measurement error and related factors. There is also no shared or widely agreed-upon definition of just what constitutes a "homeless" condition, and so different investigators are free to define the phenomenon in different ways. There is a large and obvious difference between the number literally homeless on any given night (a point prevalence rate), the number homeless at least once in the course of, say, a year (a period prevalence rate), or the number who become homeless during a given year (an annual incidence rate). No matter how inclusive the definition and how systematic the search, it is also obvious that the homeless are a mobile, even nomadic, and certainly hard-to-locate group, and so the possibility is always open that large

numbers of them have been missed in the counting effort. The above and a range of related factors imply that no study can provide a *definitive* count of the size of the homeless population. The best one can hope for is a more or less plausible count with known and small uncertainties attached to it.

"More or less plausible" is, in turn, an extremely relative matter. Among professional social scientists, there are agreed-upon criteria of plausibility, including such things as how well the sample was designed and executed, the diligence and care taken with the field operations, the conceptualization of the problem at the front end of the research, the sophistication of the data analysis, and so on.

In the middle and late 1980s, a number of national conferences on counting the homeless were convened, always with palpable tension. Advocates who agreed to participate in these conferences were certain that there were a lot more homeless people "out there" than the researchers had ever been able to enumerate; most researchers who attended the conferences were prepared to believe this but wanted to know just where all the "missing" homeless were. From this tension derived the notion of the "hidden homeless" – persons illegally doubled or tripled up with family and friends, those who preferred for legal or other reasons to remain out of sight, homeless people who were temporarily institutionalized (in jails, prisons, hospitals, etc.), those who routinely spent their nights in places where enumerators never looked.

Since all of these are plausible points – no researcher could realistically claim to have counted *everyone* – it soon became customary to describe counts of the literal homeless as lower boundary estimates and to make upward statistical adjustments to produce "best guess" estimates. (No upper boundary has yet been produced since in at

least some of the expansive definitions of "homelessness," the category demarcates nearly the entire poverty population of the country, some 35 million people.) This custom produced an uneasy truce between advocates and researchers. Researchers could (and do) say that there are at least X number of homeless (in a city, a state, or in the nation) and quite possibly more than X ; advocates in turn could (and do) say, with validity, that the estimated X does not rule out a true number very much larger than X .

By the end of the 1980s, most credible studies were converging on an X for the nation as a whole in the middle-to-high hundreds of thousands – somewhere, that is, between a half million and a million literally homeless people in the United States on a typical night (for an overview of research on this point, see Kondratas 1991). A well-known Urban Institute study (Burt and Cohen 1989) projected 567,000 to 600,000 homeless people, with a proviso that the projection is "probably on the high end, based on our desire to err on the side of generosity . . . to avoid getting into the same kinds of binds that HUD had gotten into before" (quoted in Kondratas 1991, p. 7). An analyst projected a conservative number of "about 700,000" in an influential article (Tucker 1987); a 1990 Congressional Budget Office estimate was also around 700,000. Thus, there was a rough agreement at the end of the decade that the number of the homeless was probably more than a half million but less than a million. This was still many fewer homeless people than most advocates believed there to be, but it was a number that they and the research community had more or less agreed to live with.

2. The 1990 Census

Throughout the era of the "numbers controversy," it was known to all participants

that the 1990 federal census of the population would also attempt to enumerate the homeless. The effort to count the homeless took place on the night and early morning of March 20–21, 1990, so-called "S-Night" ("S" stands for "shelter and street"). Between 6:00 p.m. and midnight on March 20, census teams entered all known shelters for the homeless to enumerate homeless persons sleeping or staying indoors. From 2:00 to 4:00 a.m. the next morning, the enumerators attempted to count homeless persons out on the streets. Finally, later that morning an effort was made to locate persons occupying abandoned buildings. The intent (or perhaps the hope) was that the shelter, street, and abandoned building enumerations would yield a fairly complete, accurate, and reliable point prevalence estimate of the number of the homeless in the U.S.

During the week of April 8, 1991, the census released its S-Night results. The national homeless count was given as 200,000–300,000 people, or roughly half the "best guess" estimates that had become customary by the end of the 1980s. Thus, the number of the homeless has once again become controversial. If the census count is approximately accurate, it would imply that the research community had (inadvertently or otherwise) allowed its "best guess" to creep unjustifiably upward under pressure from advocates. Alternatively, it is certainly possible that the S-Night number is an undercount by a factor of two and that the consensus "best guess" remains the more plausible estimate.

Working with a contract from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, we undertook research on the S-Night enumeration procedures as they were applied in New Orleans, Louisiana – one of the nation's 25 largest cities. (Similar research was also undertaken in Phoenix, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York.) The results of our research

are reported below: They support the conclusion that S-Night produced a significant undercount of the homeless in the United States.

3. The S-Night Experiment

All five of the S-Night evaluations were similar in design and intent. Among the contracted activities, for example, researchers initially compiled their own independent lists of local shelters for the homeless. These inventories were subsequently compared against shelter lists developed earlier by the census district offices in conjunction with local municipal authorities, in the hope of compiling the most exhaustive list of shelters possible.

The primary activity of each of the five teams, however, was to undertake an experiment aimed directly at assessing the completeness and reliability of the early morning street count. In New Orleans, this entailed the hiring, training, and supervision of approximately sixty persons to be deployed as observers within certain designated sections of the city. The number and exact placement of the observers was not known to the census district office or to the enumerators who actually conducted the street count, although the district office (if not the enumerators) was aware that the experiment was being conducted.

The objective of the experiment is transparent and simple. As the census enumeration teams combed their assigned areas, they would be expected to encounter and enumerate the observers as well as "real" homeless people. Let us emphasize here that the enumerators were instructed to approach and enumerate *everyone* they encountered out on the streets between 2:00 and 4:00 a.m. (whether "apparently homeless" or not). Since the investigators would know who the observers were (and how

many of them were out there), any enumerated observers could be subtracted from the city totals later. Since the observers were deployed in areas known to be frequented by the homeless, during the time the enumeration was taking place, then the number of observers actually found and enumerated would give a direct indication of the completeness of the census count.

To provide further independent details on the enumeration, observers were also instructed to take note of the number of persons they observed on the street, whether those persons appeared to be homeless or not, and whether they observed those people being counted by the census enumerators. Observers also took note of other factors that might have had a bearing on the count, for example, weather conditions, police presence, and the like. Upon exiting the street, each observer was debriefed and questioned regarding these and other relevant matters.

Finally, coming at the problem from the other side, the research contract also called for samples of actual homeless persons to be interviewed the following morning, to see how many of them had been enumerated and to gauge their awareness of and attitudes about the census effort. In New Orleans, this was accomplished through focus group and one-on-one interviews with thirteen persons who appeared that morning at the local Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) clinic.

This report conveys the results of our efforts to evaluate the S-Night enumeration in New Orleans. Specifically, we describe (1) how the independent list of shelters was constructed and the problems therein; (2) the process used to hire and train street observers and the success of the census enumerators in finding them on S-Night; (3) general environmental factors that may have affected the homeless count; and (4)

the results of qualitative research concerning the homeless persons' awareness of and attitudes toward the Census Bureau's effort.

4. The Shelter Count

The S-Night shelter count appears to have been reasonably complete, although even here there were non-trivial problems. Among homeless persons that we interviewed the morning after S-Night, most who had spent the night in a conventional shelter recalled definitely having been enumerated. In shelters that the census knew about, the count was apparently quite thorough.

The list of shelters used by the census for S-Night had been developed over the previous year in consultation with municipal authorities and the local homeless advocacy community. The size and compactness of New Orleans, the concentration of shelters within a rather small geographical area, the relative dearth of local social services, and the long-standing cooperative relationship between city officials and homeless advocates all facilitated the generation of a relatively comprehensive list.

Our effort to compile an independent shelter list added little to what the census already knew. In pursuing our contacts in the local community of service providers, we were quickly reminded that the New Orleans Coalition for the Homeless had recently been instrumental in developing what is known as the city's "freeze plan," whereby extra shelter space is activated when the temperature drops below freezing (not common in New Orleans, but not unheard of). Developing this freeze plan entailed a complete compilation of existing shelter capacity, a compilation that was very current and available to the census as well as to us. Our efforts did not uncover any *conventional* shelter for the homeless that was not already

on the freeze plan list, and so we regard the S-Night shelter list as accurate and exhaustive.

The census definition of a shelter for the homeless included all "emergency public and private shelters with sleeping facilities; hotels or motels costing \$12.00 or less per night or funded either by the local government or private organizations that house homeless persons or families; excluding facilities for abused women." Thus, "flop-houses" (i.e., inexpensive commercial establishments providing either dormitory style or small, single-bed space quarters sometimes separated by wire mesh rather than walls), were supposed to be included. No a priori list of these establishments existed and so we made a special but unsuccessful attempt to identify qualifying commercial establishments. No such hotels charging less than \$12 per night came to our attention and none were included on the shelter list that we forwarded to the census. Like many cities, New Orleans has apparently witnessed the virtual disappearance of flop-house and single room occupancy (SRO) hotels, and so we were not surprised by our inability to find them.

Based on information that came to light after S-Night, however, it is clear that we were overly sanguine in this conclusion. Analytically, the commercial establishments may be divided into formal and informal sectors. The formal are simply cheap hotels or motels. The informal are *de facto* (sometimes technically illegal) lodging places without conventional sleeping facilities but that do in fact provide shelter to homeless people. Both we and the census overlooked at least some of the formal and essentially all of the informal.

One of the formal – a legal but very inexpensive commercial facility charging a mere \$5 per night – came to our attention several weeks after S-Night was completed. This

facility does not advertise in any known source, has no sign gracing its rundown facade, does not have a listed phone number, and was not known to any of our contacts in the homeless community. We learned of its existence through a newspaper story about a homicide that had occurred on the premises. It is not likely that this is the only such flophouse in the city; just how many similar establishments exist in New Orleans is anybody's guess. More to the point, it is not obvious how one would go about compiling a comprehensive list of such places, except perhaps by working with the local police or cultivating contacts in segments of the criminal community. (The \$5-a-night flophouse that we did learn about is clearly a locus of drug traffic, prostitution, and related criminal activities.) Also unknown is the number of homeless people who spent S-Night lodged in this or similar establishments, the first of several uncertainties in the S-Night shelter count.

The informal sector of commercial establishments was brought to our attention by two homeless individuals interviewed the morning following S-Night and confirmed by numerous others since. Typically, these are small, out-of-the-way establishments or bars (or sometimes even private residences) that are known as "drink houses." Technically, they are not places of lodging. Nonetheless, people regularly spend the night in them, sometimes curled up in a booth but often sprawled out on the floor or an available billiards table. Importantly, this behavior is not illicit (as in the bus station or other public places); rather, it is encouraged by the proprietor. These "drink houses" are to the homeless alcoholic what "crack houses" are to the homeless drug addict. In both cases, an entrepreneur provides a relatively secure environment where addicts, alcoholics, and the like can stay literally for weeks at a time.

Our sources within the homeless community indicate that these informal lodges serve as a "hangout" (i.e., a regular place of association) and a not infrequent source of shelter. In some respects, they are more like private clubs than commercial taverns, with a fairly regular set of homeless patrons who purchase and consume liquor (and food if available) on the premises, even securing credit against any regular source of income such as a disability check. In exchange for the business, the proprietor offers a safe place to spend the night.

It seems obvious that these informal lodgings should be included in the list of shelters for purposes of enumerating the homeless, but no list of them exists and it would not be easy to prepare such a list. It would also be relatively dangerous to attempt enumeration inside such places, since the proprietors are highly motivated to keep their existence and operation a secret. For present purposes, it is sufficient only to conclude that some and possibly many homeless people spent S-Night in these places and were therefore not enumerated.

In addition to shelters, cheap hotels, and other more or less conventional sources of over-night lodging, the homeless often spend their nights in public facilities such as bus stations, airport terminals, subway stations, and the like. Most of these sorts of public facilities *were* included in the S-Night street enumeration, but one important omission also came to light during our interviews with homeless persons the following morning. In New Orleans, sizable numbers of homeless people spend the night at the emergency room of Charity Hospital, the only public hospital providing indigent health care in the city. The waiting area of the emergency room has seats for several hundred persons; *most* homeless people that we interviewed admitted to spending at least an occasional night there. It is therefore

likely that Charity Hospital is in effect the second largest shelter for the homeless in the city but no S-Night enumeration took place there because the hospital was not on the census list.

Given the uncertainties we have just sketched, it is not possible to estimate the overall effect of these various omissions on the shelter count. If cheap hotels were numerous, the impression that the flophouses and single room occupancy hotels have simply disappeared from the city would be less widespread, and this is probably the least serious of the problems with the shelter count. Also, even assuming some turnover in the course of a night, the total number of homeless persons who circulate through Charity Hospital could not be more than a few hundred. The number of homeless persons who spend their nights in "drink houses" and "crack houses" is completely unknown. It is doubtful that these problems caused thousands of New Orleans' homeless to have been missed, but an undercount of hundreds is certainly plausible. The total capacity of the 25 conventional shelters that did appear on the census list is only about 850 beds, however, and judged against this very limited capacity, a possible undercount of hundreds is surely significant.

5. The Street Count

The centerpiece of our S-Night evaluation was the deployment of street observers in areas of the city frequented by the homeless. Recruiting the necessary complement of observers was a major operational task. Since we would be placing temporary university employees out on the streets of the city between 2:00 and 4:00 in the morning, there were critical liability issues to be resolved and release forms to develop. Because of an exceptionally short time frame, we had no

opportunity to recruit our observers through normal channels. The Census Bureau disallowed the use of off-duty police officers on the grounds that they might be known to the homeless and scare homeless people off the streets. The university strongly discouraged the use of undergraduates; the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) told us that hiring student athletes for the purpose would violate the conditions of their athletic scholarships.

In the end, our observers were recruited from three sources. First were about ten of our own graduate students who agreed to our terms. Next, we approached the staff of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) and asked whether any of their personnel might be interested in working as observers. Our inquiry was greeted enthusiastically and the ACORN staff member even volunteered the use of their building as a possible training site. Within a relatively short time, we had signed up about three dozen ACORN workers, most of them community organizers very familiar with the downtown area where the S-Night operation would be concentrated.

Finally, we approached the director of the Center for Supervised Residential Services (CSRS), Louisiana's largest private provider of residentially-based alcohol and drug treatment programs, to see whether we could enlist observers among CSRS clients, especially veterans and formerly homeless persons. About twenty of our observers were recruited from this source.

In all, we recruited and trained 58 people for the street operation. For obvious reasons, all of our observing teams consisted of two people, and by 1:45 a.m. on the morning of S-Night, we had 29 teams of observers deployed around the city. About half of our observers were African-American; two were Hispanic, one a Native American, and the

rest white. Approximately two-thirds were male; ages ranged from 18 to 50. Finally, slightly more than a quarter of our observers had themselves once been homeless.

Training of our observers was relatively straightforward and took place on the weekend before S-Night itself. We began by briefing the team on the 1990 census, the particular project in which they were involved, the need for confidentiality, and what would be expected of them as observers. All observers were paid for their time, sworn in as temporary employees of the Census Bureau, and provided with a three-hour training session covering unobtrusive observation, census protocol, and safety procedures.

Several key points were stressed during training and again just prior to deployment on S-Night itself. First, observers were to remain within their assigned area at all times during the two hours of the street count, although they were free to move around within their areas if they wished. Secondly, contrary to their expectations, they were *not* supposed to “pretend” they were homeless. Most showed up for S-Night dressed in usual street clothes; some looked rather shabby, none looked like tourists. Finally, they were not to do anything either to attract or avoid the census enumerators; if approached, they were to answer any questions asked of them openly and honestly. In essence, our observing teams were instructed to sit, stand, or walk around in their assigned areas, making mental notes as to conditions, other people in their area, presence of police, presence of census enumeration teams, etc.

A few weeks prior to S-Night itself, the local census office provided us with a list of the 19 “nodes” or locations where their enumerators would be searching for homeless people in the city. Each node represented the center point of a four-by-four block grid (i.e., a 16 square block area). We laid out the

19 squares on a city map and chose a sample of 30 specific block locations where we would deploy our observation teams. Owing to observer attrition between training and S-Night, one of the 30 sites was subsequently dropped. Thus, between 2:00 and 4:00 a.m. on the morning of S-Night, we had 29 teams of observers (58 persons) deployed in areas of the city where we knew the census would be looking for homeless people. We also had two “drive-by” teams that continuously monitored the whereabouts, safety and general conditions of the observers and the environment.

Observations made during the S-Night experiment suggest that the street count was seriously incomplete. First and most obviously, the census enumerators located only 19 of our 29 teams (65.5%), despite the fact that all 29 were highly visible all night long and deployed in areas where the census was definitely searching. That, moreover, was the highest “hit rate” among the five cities where the experiment was done; in the other four cities, the rate ranged from 22% to 50%. The actual undercount in New Orleans, however, was even worse than these results suggest, for reasons enumerated below.

5.1. Weather

All 30 (later 29) sites where our observers were placed had been reconnoitered during daylight hours in the week prior to S-Night. Homeless people were visibly present in every location. In contrast, many of these areas were nearly deserted during the S-Night operation itself. One possible explanation is that S-Night was unusually chilly. The normal minimum daily temperature during March in New Orleans is 51.6 degrees Fahrenheit; on S-Night, the overnight low dipped into the upper 30s. Many homeless who would normally re-

main on the streets may well have sought shelter from the cold on that particular evening. This does *not* imply that the conventional shelters would have been fuller than usual since they are full to capacity nearly every night in any case. It implies, rather, that many homeless would have sought some sort of sleeping location other than out-of-doors: in abandoned buildings, concealed doorways, dumpsters, and other locations where they would not have been as readily apparent to the enumerators.

5.2. *Avoiding the census*

In the weeks preceding S-Night, newspapers in a number of cities printed articles indicating that many of the homeless would purposely attempt to avoid enumeration on S-Night. Well-known advocates for the homeless, such as the late Mitch Snyder, urged a policy of non-cooperation, apparently feeling that any count would be a substantial undercount that would lead to an “official” understatement of the dimensions of the problem and to further reductions in homeless programs. Local advocates in New Orleans, in contrast, urged a policy of cooperation on the grounds that everyone’s interests would be best served by a complete and accurate count.

Did knowledge of the S-Night enumeration stimulate avoidance behavior among the New Orleans homeless, as Snyder counselled? Apparently not: Hardly any of the homeless people we interviewed the following morning knew anything about the effort to count the homeless until they themselves had been counted or until we told them about it, and no homeless person known to us, either directly or indirectly, indicated any attempt to avoid the census *per se*. Intentional evasion was not a problem in New Orleans.

At the same time, many of the homeless

have good reason to “lay low” at night – not to elude the census, but to avoid the police, criminals, and anyone else constituting a potential threat to their well-being. This response was poignantly brought to our attention by a one-legged homeless man we later interviewed. This extremely vulnerable individual had been robbed on numerous occasions; recently, his crutches as well as his money had been stolen. The logical adaptive strategy is to find a place to sleep where one could not be found in normal circumstances. Successfully avoiding those who would steal the crutches from a one-legged man would also keep one safely hidden from the more benign designs of the census enumerators, not by intention but inevitably in effect.

5.3. *Observer debriefing*

At the end of S-Night, all observers completed a required written debriefing instrument and several stayed on for an extensive oral debriefing in a focus group format. Our observers reported numerous apparently homeless persons in their areas that had never been approached or enumerated by the census teams. In some cases, this was because the homeless people in question were relatively well-hidden and therefore overlooked; but in many cases, they were not particularly well-hidden and were simply avoided. Avoidance of the apparently homeless by the enumerators was more commonly reported by observers stationed in the nastier areas of the city, especially those located along a particular street with a high volume of drug trafficking, and less commonly reported in the relatively safer areas around the French Quarter. Thus, by direct observation, many (apparently) homeless people who were out on the streets in areas where the census was looking were never detected, approached, or enumerated.

Our observers also reported numerous

violations of the enumeration protocol. For example, the observers were occasionally asked, "Are you homeless?" even though the protocol specifically disallowed this question. (The idea was to enumerate all persons found on the streets regardless of their apparent homelessness.) Also, sleeping persons were sometimes awakened (they were to be enumerated but not awakened), some double-counting took place, privacy act sheets were not always distributed, etc. None of these violations is especially serious but they do indicate a certain indifference among the enumerators to the procedures that they were instructed to follow.

A number of the census enumerators also seemed extremely hesitant and fearful to our observers (the apparent explanation for the fairly widespread avoidance behavior mentioned earlier). Our drive-by teams reported that the census enumeration teams "stuck out like a sore thumb." It was also obvious that many enumerators substituted their own subjective evaluations about who looked homeless for actual enumeration.

6. Post S-Night Interviews with Homeless People

On the morning following S-Night, we interviewed 13 homeless people recruited from the waiting room at the local Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) clinic. On average, about half the clients seen at this clinic will have spent the previous night in a shelter and the other half will have spent the night out of doors (Kinchen 1990). An initial focus group with ten homeless persons was convened shortly after 8:00 a.m. Due to the previous night's cold, however, all ten had spent the night in shelters. Among the ten subjects, two were white females, three were white males, and the remaining five were black males.

All ten had heard of the census and had at

least some vague knowledge of what the census was about, but only one or two had been aware of the special enumeration of the homeless before it happened. Five of the ten were sure they had been counted, four thought that they had not been, and one individual was not sure. (In fact, the four who thought they had not been counted probably were counted, not via personal interview but from the registration cards used to check into the shelters.) None of the ten voiced any reason or inclination to avoid the census, nor were they aware of other homeless people who had attempted to avoid enumeration. None of the ten voiced any negative experiences or perceptions of the census in general, the enumerators they had encountered, or the effort to count homeless people. None said they would feel embarrassed or stigmatized by a direct question whether they were homeless or not.

Since all ten of the first group had spent S-Night in shelters, we switched to one-on-one interviews with persons who had spent the previous night out of doors, again recruiting subjects from the HCH waiting room. Three black males were interviewed in this fashion. All three had spent the night out; none thought that he had been enumerated. One had spent the night in an abandoned building in a neighboring parish. Another, a one-legged man of approximately fifty, had spent the early part of the night propped up against a tree in a downtown park. He later made his way to a dumpster and spent the rest of the night there. The third began his night in another downtown park, had gone to the bus station to escape the cold, was rousted by security, and ended his night at Charity Hospital. Between 2:00 a.m. and 4:00 a.m., none of these three were in a place where the census would have been looking. At this point, the research team had been awake for more than 24 continuous hours and the informa-

tion content of the interviews had become redundant, and so we halted the post-S-Night interviewing. Based on what our observers had reported and what we had learned from the interviewing, it was altogether obvious that the street enumeration was very much a "hit or miss" operation, with more misses than hits.

6.1. *Site selection*

A final important factor that imperiled the success of the street count has to do with the limited nature of the search sites themselves. The census street enumeration effort was concentrated in 19 nodes in the downtown and near-downtown areas. With one or two exceptions, these 19 provide a reasonably thorough coverage of the high-density, homeless-frequented, downtown and near-downtown areas of the city. Still, there are vast stretches of the city outside the downtown area and these stretches were not covered at all. There are significant (although less dense) nodes of homeless concentration in the Uptown area, in the Ninth Ward, on the West Bank, and elsewhere in the city, and these were ignored altogether. Also uncounted were any "scattered site" homeless, that is, homeless people who spent the night tucked away here, there, and everywhere, outside the higher-density nodes.

7. **Final Observations**

The S-Night homeless enumeration proceeded in two principal phases. The first, the shelter count, appears to have been reasonably complete in those conventional shelters of whose existence the census was aware. Still, as we suggested earlier, the undercount resulting from unconventional shelters and quasi-shelters of which the census was not aware, at least in New Orleans, could easily have been on the same order of magnitude

as the count itself (that is, in the hundreds). The second, the street enumeration, missed (1) all homeless people who spent the night outside of the 19 nodes of the city that were searched, (2) all homeless people who spent the night within those 19 nodes but in concealed places where they would never have been found, and (3) based on the "hit rate" among our observer teams, at least a third (and possibly more than a third) of the homeless who were within the 19 nodes and in more or less plain view. It is thus an easy inference that the street count was an undercount by at least a factor of two, and quite possibly more than a factor of two, and from that we infer that the current "best guess" estimates of the number of the homeless in the United States should not be revised downward based on the S-Night results.

Since the census is constitutionally obligated to enumerate the entire United States population, there is no doubt that another effort to count the homeless will be mounted in the year 2000. To this end, we offer the following concluding observations.

First, site selection should be much more extensive, with a concerted effort to reach those who choose to avoid areas of high concentration or seek to "hide" in such places as dumpsters. Something on the order of the "street sweep" methodology used by Rossi et al. (1987) in their Chicago study would seem appropriate, albeit extremely costly.

Second, in conjunction with a quantitatively expanded effort to enumerate the homeless, some consideration should be given to stretching out the enumeration period. The advantage would be manifest in a more efficient use of human and other resources. An obvious disadvantage would entail a presumed increase in multiple counting of individuals. The latter, largely could be offset via redesigned enumerator

protocols. It is our belief that the advantage would more than offset the disadvantage.

Third, consideration should be given to an around-the-clock mode of enumeration. During daytime reconnoitering of the sites we often observed a very different pattern of usage. In short, numerous sites were inhabited by the homeless during daytime hours. With nightfall, however, these locations were abandoned, undoubtedly due in part to the night-time safety risk. At the end of S-Night, observers came back asking, "Where was everybody?" This suggestion would appear to carry the same advantages and disadvantages as the previous suggestion.

Fourth, alternative non-street, non-shelter sites of the sorts we have discussed here (e.g., bars, the emergency rooms of hospitals, etc.) should not be overlooked in future enumerations. Necessary information concerning these locations could be gained by running several focus groups with the homeless in the months or weeks preceding enumeration. This would provide an inexpensive means to gain current information.

Fifth, our data indicate the need for more and better trained enumerators. Even assuming that the 2000 census will not entail a dramatic expansion of the homeless enumeration, it is readily apparent that enumerators must receive greater training.

Sixth, given the peculiarities of the homeless count, the bureau needs to give some consideration to how enumerators might better function in the face of high security risks.

8. References

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Received June 1991
Revised December 1991