

New Census Takes to the Streets

With federal funds at stake, cities and counties mount a massive effort to count the homeless.

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Cities and counties in California will attempt to count people living on the streets this week as part of a nationally coordinated effort to determine the extent of homelessness.

Trained volunteers will fan out to shelters, jails and hospitals and will search sidewalks, parks and freeway overpasses.

In Los Angeles and Orange counties, which have some of the nation's largest homeless populations, the count will be the first comprehensive attempt to canvass the homeless.

Much is at stake: Cities and counties without accurate counts will risk losing some of the federal money they receive for such programs as housing, outreach and mental health services for the homeless.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has asked cities and counties that receive federal aid for the homeless to provide statistically valid counts when they apply for grants. And with more than \$1.2 billion in federal aid at stake, about 430 of them across the country are expected to participate, with a few more conducting tallies in early February.

"This is a huge logistical undertaking," said Karen Roper, who oversees Orange County's homeless programs. "Counties across the U.S. are extremely fearful they'll have an undercount."

Los Angeles, Orange and Riverside counties together are expected to muster more than 2,000 volunteers and paid workers to cover more than 12,000 square miles. Counts will also be conducted in San Francisco, San Diego and other California cities and counties.

The effort will be matched elsewhere in the country. In the Atlanta area, 300 enumerators, using cellphones and laptop computers, will record numbers in a central database.

New York City will launch its first count of the homeless in all five boroughs, with 2,000

volunteers walking streets and checking subway stations.

Gathering accurate statistics on the numbers of homeless people, long considered too costly and impractical, is now seen as essential to better understand the problem and determine the need for government services.

"Ten or 15 years ago, we were basically addressing homelessness with food or clothing, until we began to see it as a much more complex problem," said Joseph Colletti, an urban studies specialist who is coordinating counts for Pasadena and Riverside County. "As a result, we've grown more sophisticated in our social service approach."

In place of guesstimates, anecdotal evidence or expert opinions, federal officials want uniform data that will allow for regional and state measures of progress in ending homelessness. "Accurate numbers really provide a critical tool," said HUD spokesman Brian Sullivan. "We'll have a much more comprehensive understanding of the impact that programs are having."

Los Angeles County has gained notoriety as the homeless capital of America. But its number — an estimated 84,000 homeless — is 10 years old and is an estimate of the number of homeless people receiving public assistance, not a head count.

Officials said they believed that number was likely to change.

"I think there will be some deviation from the old number, but it may be more, it may be less," said Mitchell Netburn, executive director of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, which administers federal homeless funds.

In Riverside County, which will conduct its count on Wednesday, a 2003 survey came up with 2,562 homeless people, only a third of its earlier estimate of 8,000, said Cathy Welborn, the county's administrative manager for homeless programs.

"We think 8,000 may have been overstated, but it's higher than 2,562," she said. "This count is the benchmark for the whole county."

HUD is asking the affected cities and counties to do a street count every other year. Most will do them during the last week of January, when it is thought that most homeless people will have sought refuge from the cold in shelters and will be easier to find.

Most counts will be completed in one night and will be simple head tallies. But some larger areas, such as Los Angeles County, will count during several days and use sophisticated sampling methods.

Orange County, which hopes to receive about \$14 million in federal funds, plans to send out 500 volunteers from 3 to 10 a.m. Thursday to conduct its count.

In Los Angeles County, with about \$53 million in federal funds for the homeless at stake,

the canvass is one of the most ambitious in the country. The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority contracted with Applied Survey Research, a Watsonville, Calif., firm that has done previous surveys of homeless people, to help devise the methodology and evaluate the results.

The count, more than six months in the planning, will cost \$350,000 and employ 1,000 paid workers and volunteers.

"This is one of the largest projects we've worked on," said Peter Connery, vice president of the Watsonville company. "This will be some of the most sophisticated sampling done in the country, and sampling is the wave of the future in homeless enumerations."

The count includes four approaches:

- Street counts. The project will focus on 500 of the county's 2,050 census tracts. On Tuesday, counts will be conducted in the Antelope Valley, the San Fernando Valley and West Los Angeles. The next night's counts will be in the San Gabriel Valley, East Los Angeles and the South Bay. And on Thursday, South and Central Los Angeles, including downtown's skid row, will be counted.
- Shelter counts. On the same nights, counts will be conducted in shelters, transitional housing, rehab facilities, hospitals and jails.
- Face-to-face surveys. After the streets counts, in-depth surveys will be conducted with 3,300 homeless people in shelters and on the streets to collect detailed demographic data, such as age, ethnicity and gender.
- Telephone surveys. About 400 randomly selected households will be contacted to find homeless people who might elude street enumerators. People will be asked if they have been homeless in the last year or if they are housing anyone who would otherwise be homeless.

Advocates in Southern California and other areas with warmer winter climates are especially concerned that homeless people will be harder to find, making accurate counts more difficult.

Dwight and Leia Smith, who operate a shelter near downtown Santa Ana, said that counting the homeless was a daunting task.

"The homeless have their spots that they guard, and they don't tell people where their spots are," Leia Smith said. "If our point is to count, then how can we do a good job? If we were only going to count people who sleep in beds, it might work."

The Smiths are planning to serve a steak dinner Wednesday night to entice more homeless people to their shelter to be counted.

Many agencies are also paying homeless and formerly homeless people to help with counts. In Los Angeles, they will be paid \$10 for each hour they spend on the street count.

At a recent training session at a Veterans Administration building in Westwood, volunteers were schooled in filling out tally sheets and using street smarts to avoid dangerous situations.

They will work in teams of two to canvass an entire census track on foot or by car. On a form, they will record the homeless as men, women, unknown gender, youths and families. And they will note homeless people spotted in cars, vans and encampments.

Leigh Barber, a 49-year-old former aircraft industry worker who has been homeless for six months, was trained to be an enumerator.

Barber said he hoped the count would lead to more homeless services but he said he was worried that it would be difficult to get an accurate count.

"There are a lot of people like me, in a suit and a tie, who are able to hustle up some money during the day," he said, "and who you would never think are homeless."

Times staff writer Jennifer Mena contributed to this report.