

# Putting Faces on the Numbers

By Oliver Lukacs

Staff Writer

*January 28* -- It's 8:30 p.m. on Tuesday and the Ken Edwards Center is jammed with homeless or near homeless people looking to make a quick 50 bucks.

The air is hot with the sweat of desperation that accompanies a room jam-packed with people who have been searching unsuccessfully for a job for months or years and probably haven't seen a shower in days or weeks.

Near shouting, confusion, and a level of panic fills the air as people are hurriedly vetted into teams; equipped with maps, pocket flashlights and clipboards; assigned to roughly 20-block areas and matched with those who have cars.

This is the Santa Monica contingent of street counters at the forefront of an unprecedented \$350,000 countywide homeless census, and much is at stake on this night as the hastily gathered group combs the streets, beaches and alleys looking for the city's homeless.

The hard numbers demanded by the federal government will determine funding levels for local social service agencies competing for millions of dollars in subsidies. It is a scene that will likely unfold in community centers and on city streets across the nation.

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In the shuffling crowd stands the stocky, mild-mannered Matthew Adams, 50, an African-American ex-con and a former business-owner-turned-homeless by some twist of fate. If anyone is familiar with the territory, Adams explains, it's not volunteer social workers but the homeless themselves. They have the home field advantage.

"A lot of people wouldn't do as good a job because they'd be afraid of the homeless," Adams says smiling. "As a matter of fact, we're the ones they're afraid of."

Robin Russell, an African-American woman who acted as part of Adams' team, agrees.

"The majority of people are here for the money," she says. "There's a lot of people who are homeless and have no money, and want to do something instead of panhandling or begging. They feel like, and I'm one of them, they can come down here and earn a little money counting people."

"And," she says with a mischievous arch in her eyebrow "I probably know half of them anyway."

The pay is ten bucks an hour, starting at 9 p.m. with a 2 a.m. cash-in deadline. Of the roughly 600 people trained, about a 130 showed up for the Santa Monica street count. Only 60 were chosen.

A number of conspiracy theories circulate to explain why so few were chosen to cover a city that boasts some 2,000 of the projected 84,000 homeless living in Los Angeles County.

In an article that appeared in the morning *Los Angeles Times* it was speculated "that police had roused the homeless in the days before the census," a rumor Santa Monica police spokesman Lt. Frank Fabrega has repudiated.

The only logical motivation behind such a roust would be to artificially deflate the numbers in order to shrink the local social services agencies' budgets, making Santa Monica less attractive for the homeless, some have speculated.

Others have argued that taking the homeless off the street in their home district and making them counters in another, where they can't count themselves, also deflates the numbers artificially.

But there is no time for speculation. The clock is ticking down and there's a lot of turf to cover. The makeshift army of counters begins plotting its moves and fanning out across a city that is known as "the home of the homeless."

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The home field advantage pays off for 23-year-old Skylar Deranick, a fresh-faced energetic runaway who lives out of his car in Hollywood.

Defying the law, and perhaps taking his life into his hands, Deranick has entered the brush-covered bluffs after nightfall, where more than one homeless corpse has been discovered. He knows there are homeless there to be found and counted.

Deranick penetrates deep into the shadows he knows conceal a hidden society below the upscale hotels that front Palisades Park. There, he unearths suitcases with homeless belongings, covert shrubby vestibules and homeless people hiding in a destitute underworld with a panoramic view of the ocean.

"I found another one," he screams over to Nick Fiaschetti, 24, his tally partner for the night.

Standing under a palm tree in the crisp clear night sky holding the clipboard, Fiaschetti, a deeply Christian aspiring singer from Texas on the verge of homelessness, pauses before penciling a mark on the survey.

"Is it a man or a woman?" he asks Deranick. Since the person is wrapped in blankets, it is impossible to determine age or gender, which the survey requires.

Other counters would later attest to bumping into the same problem.

"I'm guessing that was a man," Fiaschetti says after inspecting the blanketed statistic sleeping on the walled off edge of the bluff.

*How did he arrive at that conclusion?"*The shoes, it didn't look too womanly."

That settled, he marked the survey. An eighth homeless person had been counted.

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*Joseph Stalin once famously remarked that the death of one Russian is a tragedy, but the death of a million is a statistic. For many of the counters who are themselves on the verge of homelessness, coming face to face with their statistical counterparts humanizes the numbers and brings home the full reality of their own plight.*

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The survey was scheduled between 9 p.m. and 2 a.m. because that's when the homeless are stationary, and easier to count. But what makes them easier to count is the defining characteristic of being homeless -- having to sleep on the street.

For Adams, who has managed to somehow avoid sleeping on the street, seeing where the homeless are forced to make their home is what makes the tragedy real for him.

"I expected it, but when you see a homeless person walk by it's one thing," Adams says. "When you go looking for a homeless person it's a different thing.

"You see more when you look for them, and you find more," he says. "It's bad. I didn't expect to find so many people sleeping on the streets."

*So now, when he sees the mark on the page, what does he see?*

"I see a person."

*Does he see himself?*

"Not as bad as I saw these people. They're on a lower level, worse off."

*But he's been homeless?*

"Yeah, I've slept in cars, in restaurants, on benches. I've done the same thing."

*So why doesn't he see himself in them?*

"Because I'm trying to raise myself up out of this condition. Some people are comfortable like that, I can never be comfortable like that. I'm determined not to be a line a page."

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*None of the collectors recognized themselves as homeless -- nobody looks at a statistic and sees his or her own face.*

*Perhaps this is why all are hesitant to give their last name, and why, when asked if they are receiving government aid or how long they've been homeless, their voices take on a very serious tone, almost dropping to the level of a whisper.*

*The paradox is that they almost prefer to remain a faceless statistic.*

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Mario Miles, a soft-spoken middle-age man with dreadlocks from Senegal who has been homeless for eight years, was treated to the bizarre experience of marking himself down on the survey. One more line next to many on the paper.

He says it "feels good to be able to acknowledge myself," but then adds that "I don't consider myself homeless." In a line repeated by others, he says "homelessness is a state of mind."

*What's his last name?*

"Last name? I have different last names."

*What's his most current last name?*

"Why do you want my last name?"

*To put a face on the numbers.*

"Okay, then, lets say Miles."

*So how long has Mario Miles been homeless?*

"Well, I don't consider myself homeless. Homeless is a state of mind."

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*Giving real names means putting a face on the number, but humanizing the number means sacrificing one of the last things the homeless have left: their dignity.*

*Perhaps that's why so many of the homeless are camera-shy, recalling the old native American folklore about a camera stealing your soul, except that with these Americans, it's dignity they're afraid to lose.*

*This is the first of two parts*