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**Los Angeles Hires Homeless to Count Street Dwellers**  
Federal Funding of Programs Hinges on a Full Census;  
Hollywood Tests a Theory

By Miriam Jordan

The Wall Street Journal

LOS ANGELES -- Sandy Evans and Marie William prowled the streets of Hollywood late last Thursday night, picking their way down ominous alleys, scanning vacant lots and -- after more than an hour on the beat -- growing increasingly frustrated. Despite telltale clues such as grocery carts loaded with tattered blankets, clothing and umbrellas, the women hadn't located what they had been hired to find.

"We haven't seen any homeless people," said Ms. Evans, 55 years old. "This is terrible!"

Ms. Evans and Ms. William were participating in an unusual census: the first homeless head count in Los Angeles. A county agency hired them because they are uniquely qualified to be enumerators -- they have been homeless themselves and many still are.

Los Angeles and other cities have a lot at stake in finding as many people living on the street as possible. Competing for nearly \$1.5 billion in federal funding to care for homeless people, dozens of U.S. cities last week hit the pavement to count their street dwellers.

In the past, most municipalities normally extrapolated the number of their homeless from those who showed up at shelters, soup kitchens or medical clinics. Now, the Department of Housing and Urban Development is requiring an actual count before local homeless agencies can qualify for federal grants. In the current year, HUD is allocating \$55.6 million to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, second only to New York's \$73.2 million. Asked about recruiting homeless people to do the count, HUD spokesman Brian Sullivan says: "We don't prescribe methodology. We want statistically valid [data]."

Counting the homeless is a challenge, given the elusive nature of vagrant life and the security risks of tracking them down. So Los Angeles turned to insiders -- the homeless themselves. The county arranged for Applied Survey Research, a nonprofit group, to train homeless census takers and conduct the three-night operation, which ended in the wee hours of Friday. Atlanta and San Jose and Palo Alto, Calif., have also hired homeless people as enumerators.

Others, of course, did not. San Francisco, which counted its homeless on Jan. 25, enlisted about 250 volunteers for the effort, including public workers and activists for the homeless population. "I don't know what benefit using homeless people would bring," says Trent Rhorer, executive director of the San Francisco Human Services.

"A homeless person knows the vacant buildings . . . and parked cars where the homeless rest," says Peter Connery, vice president of ASR, which charged the county agency \$311,000 for carrying out the survey. Mr. Connery first used the technique in Monterey, Calif., six years ago. "You can't accurately enumerate the homeless without their help," he says.

Still, it was a controversial decision. Some experts doubted that people with a history of mental illness, substance abuse and joblessness, such as those in the Hollywood squad, could be trusted to accurately tally their brethren. "I wanted to make sure this wasn't just the politically correct thing to do," says Mitchell Netburn, executive director of the Los Angeles homeless agency, who was swayed by ASR's previous results.

Lured by posters promising up to \$50, some 1,200 homeless people turned up for two-hour training sessions throughout Los Angeles. Last Thursday night, 200 trained people showed up on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles for 40 canvassing spots. At a homeless shelter in the Hollywood district, more than 100 trainees reported for duty -- about 30 more than were needed there. Those who were turned away received \$20 for having gone through training.

The homeless even had a role in supervising the operation. Regional Hollywood organizer Jeffrey Peninger, a tall, blond 39-year-old who has been homeless since he was 13, offered final instructions to the attentive listeners, many of whom were so pleased to be working that they dressed up for the occasion. Pungent cologne wafted across the rows of plastic chairs. Like Mr. Peninger, a former amphetamine and intravenous drug user who is studying to be a nurse, many of those in attendance aren't currently street dwellers. They live in transitional housing.

"Remember, this is not about putting yourself in danger," cautioned Mr. Peninger. The pollsters were reminded not to interview their subjects. Unlike a regular census, the homeless survey is nocturnal, aiming to find people asleep, in order to maximize the count and minimize trouble. Instead of information about race, religion and education, the "L.A. County Homeless Street Count" forms have categories such as "number of cars with sleeping occupants" and "number of undetermined gender," for those covered by blankets.

After Hollywood councilman Eric Garcetti gave the census takers a pep talk, each pair of canvassers got a clipboard with a map of their territory, a tally

sheet and a flashlight. Then they fanned out.

Ms. Evans and Ms. William were dropped off from a government-agency van at a grungy Hollywood corner near an on-ramp leading to the 101 Freeway, one of the city's primary highways. Despite the mild winter weather, not a soul was to be found where hard-core homeless normally spend their nights.

"I've seen hundreds of homeless people here," Ms. Evans told her partner, when they passed a lot next to Los Angeles Community College. After spotting four unattended shopping carts, the women suspected that police had conducted a sweep of the area. "Homeless people don't abandon their carts," said Ms. Evans, a small woman with short strawberry-blond hair, who looks professorial behind reading glasses held together with tape. "The cart is all they have in the whole world." A police spokesman denied that there had been any roundup of homeless people.

Ms. Evans, who has bipolar disorder, says she became homeless five months ago after mental distress forced her to leave her job as a waitress at Jerry's Famous Deli, a renowned Beverly Hills restaurant. She lived in a stairwell for three months, showering and eating at a homeless walk-in facility before securing a place in a shelter.

Overdrawn on her checking account, Ms. Evans welcomed the chance to make \$50 as a census taker. She conscientiously traced on a map each street her team had passed and studied it often to be sure they hadn't overlooked a single alley. She retraced her steps to take another look whenever she thought she might have missed something.

Ms. William, an African-American, was reluctant to talk about herself beyond saying: "I never in a million years imagined I would be homeless at the age of 63." That was over two years ago. Sporting a green outfit and brand-new sneakers -- bought that morning for \$3.29 at a thrift shop -- she didn't quite fit the image of a homeless person. "You find exquisite outfits at Goodwill," says Ms. William, who was also wearing eye makeup for the excursion.

The neatly dressed pair looked odd in their surroundings. At the end of a menacingly dark street next to a highway, they spotted four vans -- one covered with graffiti -- that appeared to have people inside. Sheets lined the dashboards and windows. But Ms. Evans didn't get too close, or "they'll blow our heads off," she said. Then she made four ticks in the "car with sleeping occupants" category on the tally sheet.

More than halfway through their three-mile route, they made their first live sighting: two homeless men moving down opposite sides of a busy road. One meandered in an intoxicated state. The other pushed a cart. Ms. Evans made two checks in the "individual male" category. Shortly after, the pair spotted a

figure curled up next to a shopping cart in front of a smog-inspection center. Because the person was bundled in a black blanket, Ms. Evans placed a check in the "undetermined gender" box.

As they walked and watched, the women chatted about spiraling housing costs, the high price of medicine and their children. "One day, I want to invest in property to help the homeless and senior citizens," Ms. William said.

Close to 1 a.m., the pair saw a frail, disheveled man barely able to push a cart overflowing with paraphernalia. "He looks like he's on his last leg," Ms. Evans said. All told, they tallied 10 homeless people in three hours.

Returning to census headquarters in a van, Ms. Evans and Ms. William compared results with two other teams. Jeron Parker and Larry Simons, homeless men in their twenties, tallied 16 individuals, two inhabited vehicles and one makeshift encampment. Another team, composed of Charles Mac, in his 50s, and Marie Alvarez, 36, counted 18 individuals.

Total results won't be known for two months, but Mr. Connery, the director of the nonprofit group heading the census, is thrilled. The exercise went smoothly, and given soaring housing costs and job layoffs, he's confident the survey will show a jump over Los Angeles's decade-old homeless estimate of 84,000.

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