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15,000 census-takers count U.S. homeless

By Bob Hepburn
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WASHINGTON – In the moonlight tonight, a census-taker will walk up to the heating grates on E Street across from the U.S. state department headquarters and start counting.

He will be checking on how many homeless men and women are asleep under blankets on the grates.

And if any are awake, he's got a few questions he'd like to ask them.

A few blocks away, other census-takers will be counting how many people are asleep on benches in Lafayette Park in front of the White House, under bushes on Capitol Hill, in subway entrances and in hundreds of abandoned buildings in Washington.

It's all part of the first nationwide effort by the U.S. Census Bureau to count as accurately as possible the number of homeless people in the United States.

From 6 p.m. tonight until 8 a.m. tomorrow, an army of 15,000 census-takers will check for homeless Americans in state and local shelters, street corners, subway stations, city parks, shelters for abused women, commercial campgrounds, drug and alcohol treatment centres, hospital emergency rooms, train and bus stations, all-night theatres, and farm fields where migrant workers sleep.

From 2 a.m. to 4 a.m., they will check street locations such as subway stations and heating grates.

From 4 a.m. to 8 a.m., they will sit in their cars or stand outside abandoned buildings and count people who leave after waking up in the morning.

When it's over, the number of homeless counted may vary anywhere from 250,000 to more than 3 million.

And that huge difference in estimates of how many people are homeless in America is the reason the census bureau agreed to undertake the \$2.7-million survey.

U.S. administration officials claim the number of homeless ranges between 250,000 and 500,000. Advocates for the homeless, such as the National Coalition for the Homeless, claim the real number is 3 million.

They fear the White House will deliberately underestimate the homeless to avoid pumping more federal money into low-cost housing and other programs for the poor.

Former president Ronald Reagan drastically cut federal spending on programs for the poor, claiming the need wasn't as great as advocates suggested.

Cynthia Taueber, the census bureau official responsible for the survey, says the bureau will make its best effort to count the homeless.

The main census of about 250 million Americans will be conducted April 1.

But she admits many "hidden homeless" will not be found because they live doubled-up with friends or relatives, in tunnels or abandoned cars, or in isolated rural areas.

Federal and state governments will use the survey's findings to devise policies, such as low-rent housing, for the homeless. Washington returns billions of tax dollars to state and local governments based in part on population data.

By one estimate, each person is worth about \$150 in federal funds to a city or town.

Also, planners will use the census results

to determine where to locate facilities such as homeless shelters. As well, they require the data to help assess needs for senior citizens, students and infants in day-care centres.

After the last official census in 1980, there were 37 lawsuits filed against the census bureau charging undercounting.

In the Canadian census next year, Statistics Canada "will very definitely" use new techniques to count the homeless in the country, according to Mike Sheridan, collection manager of the 1991 census.

In fact, Statistics Canada conducted a test last week in Toronto to see whether counting homeless at "soup kitchens" would be effective.

Sheridan said researchers found in a similar test in San Francisco that up to 95 per cent of the homeless in an area came to a "soup kitchen" for a meal over a two-day period.

Statistics Canada has sent observers to several U.S. cities to watch the experiment.

Tonight, U.S. census-takers will ask the homeless simple questions about their age, sex and race.

However, they won't wake anyone who is sleeping on the streets. In those cases, the census people will guess the answers as best they can.

If a sleeping person is completely covered by cardboard or blankets, the person will be merely counted without estimating the age, sex or race.

When the final report is ready, the census bureau will not release a single number of how many homeless there are in the United States.

Instead, it will say how many homeless were found in shelters, on street corners, in abandoned buildings and in other spots where they gather.

The article EM9032 reprinted above is used in Figure 2.12 in the STAT 220 Course Materials and, together with EM0202 and EM9525, in Statistical Highlight #37.