

Search produces a wealth of data despite some holes in the canvass

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Two searchers kayaked down California's Napa River to scope out hidden encampments. Elsewhere in Napa County, the homeless and hungry were invited to a county-sponsored chicken barbecue where they could be counted.

City-paid decoys dressed in ragged clothes sprawled on Manhattan steam grates, waiting to see whether volunteers stopped to interview them.

Los Angeles County spent \$72,000 to hire 629 homeless people at \$10 an hour to ferret out their brethren in alleys and oceanfront parks.

For cities and counties that took a special census of their homeless populations this year, creative techniques promised big payoffs. At stake was their share of a \$1.6 billion pot of federal money next year.

A 'street count' this year

In 2003, U.S. housing officials who award assistance grants for homelessness started requiring a yearly count of people in shelters. This year the government went further, calling for a "street count" of people living under bridges, in parks or in cars, alleys and subways.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development wasn't satisfied with earlier estimates and ordered the most exhaustive tally of actual homeless people ever done. HUD will use the nationwide total as "a baseline, a tool to gauge the effectiveness of local programs," spokesman Brian Sullivan says.

Street counts will be repeated every two years.

HUD hasn't released the final tally, but USA TODAY contacted the 460 cities and counties that participated in the count and tabulated the results. The nationwide total of 727,304 was within the range of previous estimates, says sociologist Martha Burt of the Urban Institute.

A USA TODAY analysis of the count shows:

- Even the most affluent or booming places have homeless people. The survey found 336 in Palm Springs, Calif. In Massachusetts, Nantucket Island, Martha's Vineyard and Cape Cod had a combined total of 1,228. Las Vegas counted 5,106 — plus 7,092 "sofa surfers" staying with relatives or friends. HUD doesn't count as homeless those doubled-up with others, or families crowded into motel rooms.
- Shelters don't have room for everybody on cold winter nights, and not everyone is willing to go. Anchorage found 30 people sleeping on the street in January. In Flint, Mich., 86% of those counted were unsheltered. As expected, cities with warmer climates had a high percentage of homeless on the streets: 88% in Los Angeles County and 56% in Honolulu.
- In New York City's subway cars and stations, 835 people were curled up for the night, accounting for 19% of the city's street homeless and 2% of the city's total homeless.
- In some cities, many homeless people work daily jobs that don't pay enough to cover housing costs. That's the case for 36% in Tallahassee, Fla., and 40% of those in shelters in Buffalo.

The national count was not exact. Some rural areas didn't participate. "The cops say, 'We don't have any,' " says Sandy Miller, an AmeriCorps-VISTA volunteer in Palestine, Texas. "There are no transient homeless because they send them somewhere else."

Methods varied

And survey methods varied widely. HUD allowed some statistical sampling. New York City, Houston and other places used sampling to supplement the actual count.

Street counts present a host of problems. They need a lot of volunteers and can be dangerous. "We don't really put a ton of effort into it, because it's hard to do," says Grace Carmark of the Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance in Worcester.

"A lot of homeless people don't want to be counted," says Mark Spiker, an homelessness activist in Lakeland, Fla. "When we walk into an area, they kind of evaporate."

Homeless families "generally try to hide," says Victor Hudanko, a Mesa, Ariz., consultant to local governments. "Parents are afraid that their children might be taken away because they're sleeping in a car." Those fears are unjustified because the law requires "specific abuse" to find child neglect, he says.