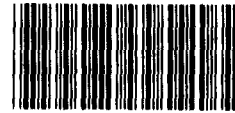


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Counting the Homeless: Limitations of 1990 Census
Results and Methodology

Statement of
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General Government Division

Before the
Subcommittee on Government Information and Regulation
Committee on Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

and the

Subcommittee on Census and Population
Committee on Post Office and Civil Service
House of Representatives



COUNTING THE HOMELESS: LIMITATIONS OF THE 1990 CENSUS
RESULTS AND METHODOLOGY

SUMMARY OF STATEMENT BY
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To its credit, the Census Bureau consistently has said that data from the 1990 census generally, and the approximately 228,000 persons counted during the March 20-21, 1990, Shelter and Street Night (S-Night) count in particular, cannot be used to construct a count of the homeless population. However, the Bureau's failure to undertake a rigorous planning effort after the 1980 census for enumerating components of the homeless population led it to adopt a methodology for 1990 that may in some respects be inferior to the approach used in 1980.

In 1990 as in 1980, the shelter count was done at night, but the street portion was significantly different. In 1980, a "Casual Count" was done in certain urban areas during the day and early evening hours at selected service, business, and outdoor locations. A 1984 Bureau evaluation identified ways to improve the Casual Count for 1990, such as developing and automating improved methods to guard against double-counting. However, the Bureau did not follow-up on the suggested actions and did not undertake a concerted effort to build on the lessons from 1980.

In the absence of any attempt to address the suggestions in the 1984 evaluation or to explore and test alternative methods, the Bureau decided in 1987 to use a nighttime enumeration in 1990. The Bureau knew that persons who would not be in shelters or at street locations would be missed. The Bureau acknowledged that research had shown that such persons may comprise up to two-thirds of the homeless street population. The 1988 census dress rehearsal, the Bureau's only test of the nighttime method, confirmed that a such a count would result in an undercount. A June 1989 Bureau test confirmed that a daytime count was a promising alternative, but was too late to be valuable for 1990.

S-Night also suffered from a number of operational limitations. S-Night observers who stayed at selected S-Night street locations reported what a Bureau official characterized as "a disturbingly high" number of cases of not being interviewed or even seeing enumerators. In addition, a Bureau study of 44 of its district offices found it initially missed 5 percent of the shelters.

However, even under the best of circumstances, a once-a-decade census of the nation's population cannot and should not be the primary vehicle to provide estimates of the number of homeless. Efforts to develop such estimates have been severely hampered by the absence of a generally agreed-upon and measurable definition of homelessness and its primary components. Such agreement is needed before developing mechanisms to measure homelessness.

Chairman Kohl, Chairman Sawyer, and Members of the Subcommittees:

We are pleased to be here to discuss the Census Bureau's 1990 Shelter and Street Night (S-Night) enumeration, which was designed to count certain persons who otherwise might have been missed by the census. As in past censuses, the Bureau did not attempt to do a census of the homeless; instead it sought to include homeless persons in the census. The distinction is critically important because, as the Bureau repeatedly has said, 1990 census data generally, and the approximately 228,000 persons counted during the March 20-21, 1990, S-Night in particular, cannot be used to construct a count of the homeless population at any level of geography.

The basic census methodology involves locating all of the nation's housing units and counting their residents. The experiences from the 1990 census have amply demonstrated that counting everyone who resides in standard housing units is extremely difficult. Not surprisingly, therefore, people who do not reside in traditional housing present an even more formidable challenge.

Today, I will discuss the limitations in the Bureau's procedures and operations that reduced the degree to which the S-Night counts are complete. I also will discuss the actions beyond the decennial census that we believe are necessary for decisionmakers

to have the data they require on the numbers, characteristics, and needs of the homeless.

My comments today are based on our work to meet the requirement in the 1990 amendments to the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (Public Law 101-645), that we review the methodology and procedures used by the Bureau to include the homeless in the 1990 census.

WEAKNESS IN 1990 S-NIGHT METHODOLOGY
LIMITS DATA QUALITY

The Bureau has attempted to count components of the homeless population in previous decennial censuses. For example, persons living in doubled-up households and those in low-cost transient hotels have been sought out in basic census operations. The 1970 and 1980 censuses also included procedures to enumerate persons who live on the streets and other places not intended for habitation.

For 1990, in addition to the standard household enumeration, the Bureau counted persons in certain shelters and at selected street and other locations prior to Census Day. More than 22,600 Bureau field staff visited 10,600 shelters from 6:00 p.m. until midnight on March 20 and 24,300 street sites, open public locations, and abandoned buildings from 2:00 a.m. until 8:00 a.m. on March 21, 1990.

The 1990 approach is in marked contrast to the method used in 1980. In 1980 as in 1990, the shelter count was done at night, but the street portion was significantly different. In 1980, a "Casual Count" was done in selected urban areas over a 2-week period about 6 weeks after Census Day. The Bureau visited such places as employment, welfare, and food stamp offices during business hours and certain businesses, street locations, and parks until 8:00 p.m. to identify persons who may have been missed by the standard household enumeration.

During the 1980 Casual Count, enumerators completed forms on persons who said that they had not been included on a census form and lived in the area. The Bureau added those persons without a usual residence to the count. For persons who reported that they had a usual residence, the Bureau compared the information it gathered with census forms from individuals' reported addresses, and added persons it could determine had been missed by the original enumeration. According to Bureau reports, about 44,000 persons were interviewed, and about 13,000 were added to the 1980 census as a result of the Casual Count.

The Bureau's July 1984, evaluation of the Casual Count recommended that the Bureau do a Casual Count in 1990 and suggested several improvements, including developing and automating improved methods to ensure persons are not counted

more than once. However, the Bureau did not follow-up on the suggested actions and did not undertake a concerted effort to build on the lessons from the 1980 Casual Count.

In the absence of a systematic attempt to address the suggestions in the 1984 evaluation and to rigorously explore and test refinements to a daytime count, the Bureau decided by 1987 to use a nighttime enumeration in 1990. This decision was made after consulting with private researchers who had attempted local counts of the homeless. The 1990 S-Night procedures were to count all persons at S-Night shelter and street locations, except those in uniform or engaged in obvious money-making activities. Thus, the 1990 procedures enabled the Bureau to resolve its concerns about double-counting by assuming that all persons at S-Night shelter and street locations would not be counted through standard enumeration procedures.

A major difficulty with any attempt to count the homeless is that a portion of the homeless population remains elusive. Nighttime enumerations are especially vulnerable to missing such persons. The Bureau has acknowledged that the "hidden homeless"--for example, persons who slept in dumpsters or cars or on roofs--would not be in shelters or visible at identified street locations during the night and likely were missed on S-Night. Because of concerns about the safety of its enumerators, the Bureau decided that it would not have staff attempt to enumerate

persons at such locations--a decision that we agree was prudent. By its very nature, it is not possible to estimate with precision the size of the hidden homeless population. However, before S-Night, the Bureau acknowledged that independent research had shown that the hidden homeless could comprise up to two-thirds of the street population.

The Bureau's first and only test of the nighttime method was the 1988 dress rehearsal, which was intended to be the final census test before the actual census. Over 90 percent of the persons counted on the dress rehearsal S-Night at the St. Louis, East Central Missouri, and Eastern Washington dress rehearsal sites were enumerated in shelters. This reinforced the Bureau's belief that a nighttime street enumeration would result in an undercount. The independent Bureau-sponsored evaluation of the dress rehearsal S-Night concluded in December 1989 that the Bureau needed to very seriously consider alternative methods and procedures for doing the street count.

The Bureau tested a daytime enumeration at facilities that serve homeless persons in Baltimore in June 1989--less than one year before S-Night. At the same time, the Bureau did a street and shelter night and compared the results to the day count. The test showed that, at a minimum, a daytime enumeration is successful in counting persons who would be counted during S-Night.

Moreover, the Baltimore test also showed that a daytime count was effective in counting at least a portion of the hidden homeless population. Although some persons would continue to remain elusive because they do not rely on services, a daytime count, combined with a nighttime shelter count, nevertheless offers the important opportunity to improve--though certainly not to perfect--the census count of a population that can be very difficult to reach.

The Bureau also concluded that while a daytime enumeration of persons at social service centers was promising, additional research was needed, for example, to develop screening questions to determine which persons were homeless and to match persons counted at different locations to guard against double-counting. Concerns about double-counting had been raised in the Bureau's 1984 evaluation of the Casual Count but the Bureau did not pursue them at that time.

According to the Bureau, even if the daytime method tested had been shown to be clearly superior to S-Night, it was too late to implement it for the 1990 census and the Baltimore test was done as part of early planning for the 2000 census. In short, the Baltimore test was held several years too late for the 1990 census. Little immediate value was gained from a test done after

all the key decisions about the structure of the 1990 census were made.

In summary, given the nature of the homeless population, it is unlikely that any method would result in a complete count. However, the Bureau, in designing its 1990 approach did not exploit opportunities identified in 1984 to build on the experiences from 1980. The 1989 test, combined with the results of the dress rehearsal, confirmed that a daytime method was a promising alternative to the chosen nighttime method. However, these tests were of little value for the 1990 census because of the Bureau's late start in planning and testing for counting the homeless in 1990.

If the Bureau had aggressively addressed the recommendations in its 1984 evaluation and initiated planning and testing earlier in the decade, it may have been able to overcome the procedural problems with a daytime count. While quantification is not possible, a daytime count similar to the approach taken in 1980 appears to have provided the opportunity for improved census coverage. In this regard, we understand that Canada, which monitored S-Night, will enumerate components of the homeless population next month as part of its census by using a shelter count at night and a count at soup kitchens during the day.

OPERATIONAL PROBLEMS FURTHER LIMIT
USEFULNESS OF S-NIGHT DATA

The Bureau has acknowledged that S-Night suffered from a number of operational limitations, in addition to the methodological weakness that I have just discussed. The Bureau contracted with independent researchers in five major cities to hire observers to stay at selected street locations during S-Night. The observers reported what a Bureau official characterized as "a disturbingly high" number of instances of not being interviewed or even seeing enumerators at their predesignated locations during the enumeration hours. For example, enumerators were not observed at 18 of the 41 sites in New York; at 14 of the 28 sites in Phoenix; and at 14 of the 30 sites in Los Angeles.¹ The Bureau's procedures allowed enumerators to count persons by observation rather than by doing an interview so some observers might have been counted without their knowledge. However, we believe the consistently high rates of observers reporting not seeing enumerators, should be thoroughly examined by the Bureau as part of its evaluation of S-Night and planning for the future.

In addition to questions about the adequacy of the coverage on S-Night, there also are reasons to be concerned about the completeness of the shelter and street address list. The Bureau developed its initial list of shelters from various

¹Data from the other two cities, New Orleans and Chicago, were not available.

administrative lists such, as those maintained by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the International Union of Gospel Missions. The Bureau asked the nation's 39,000 local governmental units to supplement its shelter list and to identify street and public locations where the homeless could be found at night.

The Bureau received responses from all but 19 of the more than 1,300 governmental units with populations over 50,000 and from 36 percent (14,200) of all governmental units. Governmental units that did not respond were still included in the shelter portion of S-Night if the administrative lists examined by the Bureau indicated that there was a homeless shelter in the locality. However, the Bureau made no independent effort to identify or enumerate street locations in communities that did not respond.

To measure the completeness of its shelter list, the Bureau funded an independent study in 44 district office areas. Local homeless experts developed lists of shelters for the Bureau to compare to its own list. The Bureau found that, overall, it had identified more than double the number of shelters the experts identified. However, the Bureau also found that in 16 of the 44 district office areas, the experts identified 49 shelters the Bureau had missed. These 49 shelters represented about 5 percent of all the shelters in the areas reviewed. The Bureau subsequently visited and counted persons at these 49 shelters.

The Bureau also experienced problems with the quality of its address list of street locations. The independent observers and Bureau staff who observed S-Night reported cases where the street listings appear to have been for places where homeless persons may be found during the day rather than at night. For example, some business locations that closed in the evening were listed by local governments as a site for S-Night. In these instances, S-Night enumerators were not able to locate people to enumerate.

Local governments recognized the limitations in the list of street sites. We interviewed local government officials familiar with S-Night from a judgmentally selected sample of 20 cities, 19 of which have populations greater than 100,000, including the 5 cities covered by the Bureau's independent assessment teams. Even though the results of our work cannot be projected, we found that although the majority of officials expressed confidence in their ability to identify shelter locations, they were less confident about their ability to identify street locations where the homeless may be found at night.

Many street locations were also difficult to locate. About 90 percent of the Bureau's S-Night enumerators in the five assessment cities reported difficulties in finding their assigned locations on S-Night. Unlike 1980, the Bureau's 1990

procedures did not call for it to visit and verify street and shelter locations before the actual enumeration on S-Night. The Bureau subsequently acknowledged that not visiting locations before S-Night was a weakness in its approach.

OPTIONS FOR ESTIMATING THE NUMBER OF HOMELESS

As I noted at the beginning of my statement, the Bureau attempted to include homeless persons in the census, but did not try to do a census of the homeless. However, growing public awareness and concern over the persistence and apparent increase in homelessness during the 1980s led to the considerable attention that S-Night received from the public and the media. We believe the intense media and public attention S-Night received may have contributed to unrealistic expectations about the scope of the Bureau's effort and the degree to which the census would produce an accurate count of the homeless. To its credit, the Bureau has been open about many of the problems it experienced during S-Night and has cautioned data users accordingly.

Thus, in large measure, the Bureau should not be faulted for failing to provide a precise and discrete count of the nation's homeless--that was not the purpose of S-Night or the census. Even under the best of circumstances, a once-a-decade census of the nation's population cannot and should not attempt to be the primary vehicle for meeting policy needs on the amount and

characteristics of homelessness. A "snapshot" enumeration done on a single night is fundamentally unable to provide important information that shows how homelessness changes over time because of economic and other factors.

In various reports in recent years we have discussed the challenges to estimating the number of homeless.² Efforts to develop estimates of homelessness have been severely hampered by the absence of a generally agreed-upon and measurable definition of homelessness and its primary components. Therefore, decisionmakers first and foremost need to reach agreement on a definition of homelessness, data needs and the components to be measured, the precision of the data needed, and the acceptable limits of cost. Only then can appropriate mechanisms be developed for estimating the number of homeless.

In our 1988 report, we presented options--depending on the amount and type of data needed--for counting the homeless. For example, periodically enumerating a sample of cities and streets and shelters within those cities could provide fairly reliable national data on the number of homeless. However, such an approach would be relatively costly. On a more limited scale, a nationwide service provider statistical reporting system could be

²See, for example, Homelessness: A Complex Problem and the Federal Response (GAO/HRD-85-40, Apr. 9, 1985) and Homeless Mentally Ill: Problems and Options in Estimating Numbers and Trends (GAO/PEMD-88-24, Aug. 3, 1988).

used to measure the extent to which the homeless use social services. However, such an approach would not capture the hidden homeless who do not rely on services. To measure this population, a service-based reporting system combined with a series of intensive local samples to determine the size of the homeless population that does not rely on services could be used. Finally, a series of validated proxy measures based on various social and economic indicators, such as the poverty rate, could be developed. Although not providing data on the amount of homeless, such proxy measures could be useful in indicating trends over time.

All of the options for measuring the amount of homelessness--no matter how it is defined--extend well beyond the boundaries of a decennial census. Again, we believe it is unreasonable to expect the decennial census to assume the primary burden of providing data on a population that is as undefined, elusive, and volatile as the homeless.

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In summary, the census and S-Night were not designed to, and did not, provide a complete count of the nation's homeless. The Bureau consistently has warned data users that the decennial census is not the appropriate vehicle for determining the extent of homelessness. We have discussed in prior reports the efforts

that extend well beyond the census that need to be done to develop estimates of the number of homeless.

However, as a result of methodological and operational weaknesses, the Bureau added fewer people to the census count through S-Night than it probably could have if it had aggressively pursued the daytime method early in the decade. S-Night is an example of what has been one of our major concerns for several years: that the late census planning and failure to fully consider and evaluate alternatives that characterized the 1990 census must be avoided for the 2000 census.

This concludes my prepared statement. My colleagues and I would be pleased to respond to questions.

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