

Census Bureau

# Girding for Bid to Count Homeless

By RICHARD L. BERKE  
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Dec. 15 — Under the cover of darkness, Government agents will be dispatched across America to abandoned buildings, street corners and emergency shelters on what many say is an impossible mission: to count the homeless.

With many homeless people now out of the shadows and on the streets everywhere, their existence cannot be ignored. Yet no one knows their true number, and estimates vary from as low as 250,000 to as high as 3 million, prompting vigorous debate over how much the Government should spend to aid them.

By hiring thousands of people to roam about with flashlights on the night of March 20, 1990, as part of its most ambitious tally of the homeless, the Census Bureau hopes for the first time to develop a more realistic measure of the size and characteristics of that population. This information could be critical in determining political representation in some regions and as a gauge for Federal aid.

**Mission Called Impossible**

But there are problems. Sixteen months before it is to occur, what appears to be a good-faith effort by the Census Bureau is already being dismissed by those it might benefit as a useless exercise.

Mitch Snyder, a Washington advocate for the homeless, and others say it is impossible to reach every homeless person in the United States on a given night. As a result, they say, the

## Will the 1990 effort be an impossible mission?

tally will be unrealistically low and ripe for political manipulation, serving the interests of those who want to play down the extent of homelessness.

Census officials said they had no idea how much the homeless count would cost or how many census takers would be hired to administer it, although an estimated 450,000 workers will be involved in the main census. One indication of the scale of the effort on the homeless is that the bureau plans to send letters to 39,000 local governments, seeking guidance in identifying shelters and street locations where the homeless can be found.

But whatever the Government does, Mr. Snyder said, it will not be enough. "Hundreds of thousands of people would have to be involved. They'd have to simultaneously check every cave, every chicken coop, every barn," he said.

Robert M. Hayes, counsel to the National Coalition for the Homeless, an advocacy group for the homeless with offices here and in New York, was no more optimistic. "It's a fool's errand," he said. "Anyone who pre-

tends that there is the technology to do any kind of precise census is wrong. If 10 percent of the homeless people in the country are counted, there's a great danger that a President, uninterested in fighting homelessness, will claim homelessness is a minor American tragedy."

**Hope of Allaying Fears**

The Census Bureau has sought to allay fears by acknowledging the inherent flaws in the effort, by seeking advice from the homeless and by pledging to recruit homeless people as census takers. Moreover, the bureau emphasizes that instead of giving an official, total count of the homeless, it will publish "very conservative" statistics that will break out "basic characteristics of selected components of the homeless population," like age, sex and race.

"The homeless have always been included in the census but what's really different this time is the rather extraordinary effort," said Cynthia M. Taeuber, who is organizing the operation. "We're doing everything we can to do as good a job as we can. It's a benchmark. It won't be truth."

The Census Bureau has sought to count the homeless throughout the nation's history. In 1880 the bureau tallied the country's "defective, dependent and delinquent classes," but came up with only 21,595 "outdoor paupers" out of a national population of 50,189,209.

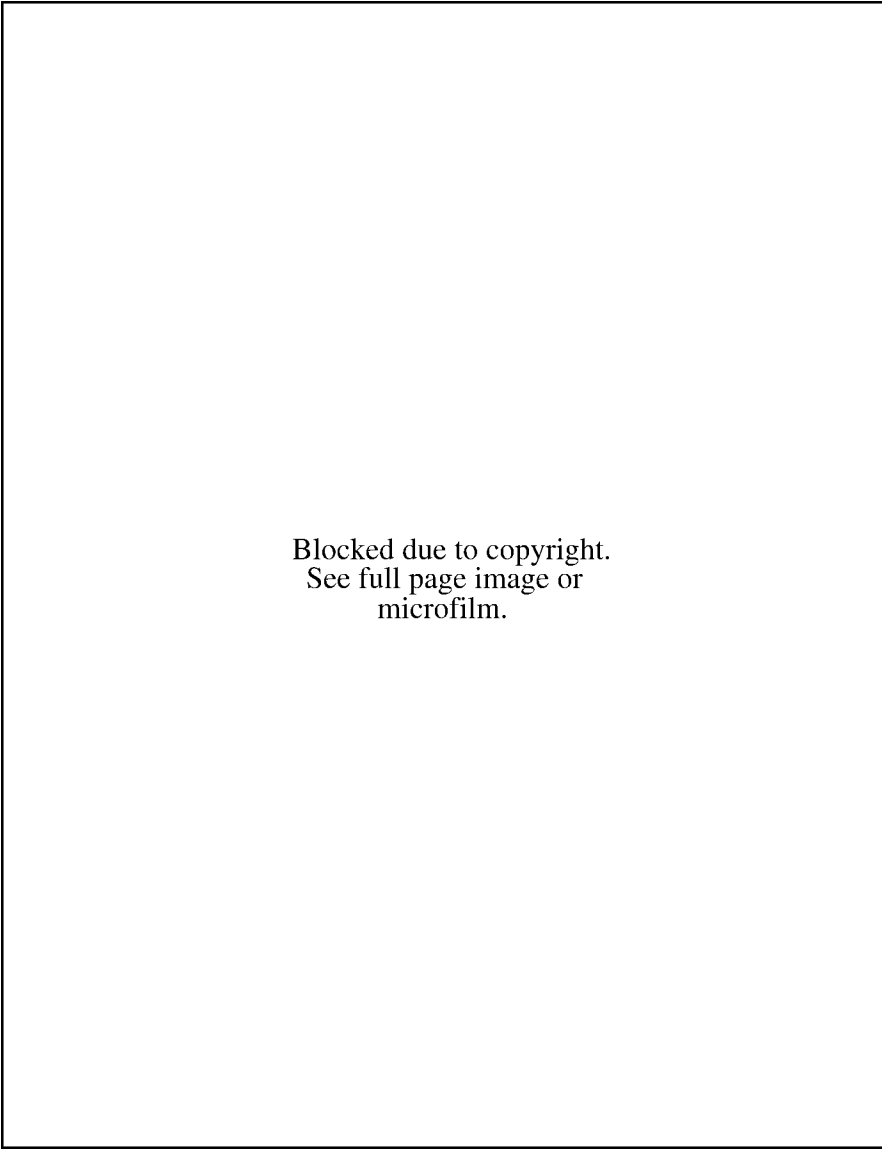
In the last census in 1980, the bureau did not conduct a separate, special count of the homeless but acknowledged that "we counted as many as we could find," which turned out to be 51,000 people — a figure not intended as an estimate of the total homeless population.

**Support for Efforts**

Despite the misgivings of advocates for the homeless, lawmakers on Capitol Hill, who last year approved legislation that budgets \$550 million to help pay for shelters, health care and other aid to the homeless, seem supportive of the homeless census.

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York, who is a leading advocate of more Federal aid to the homeless, said the separate census would be "immensely valuable," adding, "It is an iron rule of social science that the minute you put a number on something you instantly know more."

TerriAnn Lowenthal, staff director for the House Post Office and Civil Service Subcommittee on Census and Population, agreed that the homeless census should be taken but cautioned that the bureau "is probably not going to find a large percentage and the problem of homelessness could become understated."



The New York Times/Jim Hubbard  
**A homeless man sitting near an automated teller on M Street. The Census Bureau says it will try to include the homeless in its next report.**

The extensive homeless census in 1990 will take place 12 days before the regular April 1 census, because many shelters close by early April. The count will begin at 6 P.M., with counters going to pre-identified shelters and hotels and motels with rooms set aside for the homeless.

**Conducting the Count**

Counting will continue until about midnight, when most of the sheltered homeless are expected to be settled for the night. From 2 to 4 A.M., counters will walk the streets, seeking out the homeless, going anywhere from farm houses to subway stations. From 4 to 6:30 A.M., the operation will move to abandoned and boarded-up buildings.

The homeless will be asked "basic demographic questions," according to the bureau, and a sampling of those in shelters will also be asked about their social and economic back-

grounds. In the street, census takers will not awaken sleeping people but will estimate their age, sex and race. Sleeping people who are covered up will be counted and, the bureau says, characteristics will be assigned later by a computer.

Still, no matter how many counters are sent out, a fundamental problem remains: the homeless are difficult, if not impossible, to identify. Many shift from place to place in the night. And many do not want to be counted.

"Many homeless people literally hide their bodies during the night from police, attackers and robbers," June Norwood, a homeless person in Los Angeles, said at a hearing of the House Subcommittee on Census and Population.

She offered some advice for those who will leave their comfortable homes the night of March 20, 1990, to help count the homeless: not all homeless look homeless.