

Homeless in the census' sights

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A legion of clipboard-toting counters sought out shelters, subways and steam grates Tuesday in the broadest attempt ever to find out the extent of homelessness since it became a national disgrace in the 1980s.

The tally went on into the night despite a spring storm that interrupted the count in Vermont by dumping up to 22 inches of snow and the refusal of some shelters to allow census-takers inside.

Some homeless didn't mind the government intrusion.

"It shows that they're starting to recognize us as humans and not the scum of the earth," said Chester Broadwell, 21, who answered questions at the Waystation Shelter in Burlington, Vt.

No one expects the \$2.7 million, one-night U.S. Census Bureau effort to yield a precise tally of Americans with no fixed address. Critics fear an undercount will allow the government to justify cuts in services.

"We'll get the vast majority," said Barbara Bryant, director of the Census Bureau, which expected to hit 22,000 shelters and street sites nationwide.

"There are no believable numbers of homeless in America," she said at a news conference in New York. "This is going to get an order of the magnitude of the problem."

In San Francisco, hundreds of census workers visited shelters and cheap hotels.

"I hope they get all the folks

living in those cars along the waterfront and in the Financial District and a bunch of other places you'd never expect to find us," a 32-year-old homeless man who identified himself only as Johnson said at the Canon Kip Center in San Francisco.

"We've been living a long time in the cracks, and it ain't going to be easy to find a lot of us," he said as the 14-hour survey began.

Some say the figure is as low as

Please see COUNT—A14

Count/ Effort spurs criticism

Continued from Page A1

250,000 in Northern California; others claim it is more than 3 million.

In San Francisco, where estimates of the homeless range from 6,000 to about 10,000, more than 200 census workers began the survey at 6 p.m. at public and private shelters throughout the city.

In one shelter, a former gay bathhouse, residents in twos tried to relax on bunk beds in cubicles measuring 7 feet by 3 feet. In another, residents stretched out on cots just inches off concrete floors, with no partitions between them.

After midnight, they planned to begin searching streets and doorways and checking in makeshift camps set up in abandoned buildings and under bridges.

The homeless at the shelters were asked to give their name, age, sex, race, marital status and whether they were of Hispanic descent. One in six was asked about education, languages spoken and work experience last year.

At the Episcopal Sanctuary, the Rev. William "Buzz" Nern told the

250 homeless men and women staying there what to expect and not to be nervous. One woman, when asked, said she wanted to participate.

"Why sure. I exist, don't I? I'm part of the population of this country," said shelter resident Sharon Johnson.

Some shelters offered free blankets and special meals to attract as many homeless as possible. Nationwide, 15,000 enumerators — the federal euphemism for headcounters — fanned out to visit an untidy world of shelters, roosts and hideouts.

St. Paul's Community Shelter in Toledo, Ohio, lured the homeless with a party.

"The biggest fear all of us have is that the dollars will be allocated according to the numbers that they get, and the numbers will be significantly lower than the problem," said shelter director Ruth Beshalske.

But Robert Allen, 28, of Toledo, walked away when counters approached him.

"What are they going to use the numbers for anyway? To tell us

there ain't no homeless problem? Hell, I'm a living example that there is a problem," Allen said. "We need jobs, not surveys."

The homeless — now estimated to number 250,000 to 3 million — were asked their name, age, sex, race and marital status.

It's part of the constitutional mandate for the country to take stock of itself every 10 years and a throwback to the days when the count was done with personal interviews instead of computerized mailings.

But critics such as David Hayden of the Justice House Community in suburban Washington, D.C., refused to let counters inside and said the homeless could easily evade the census.

"It's akin to looking for needles in haystacks," Hayden said. "If people with clipboards can find them, so can people with 2-by-4s who want to rob them. They should spend the money on decent, affordable housing."

However, Christine Mulholland, census manager in Milwaukee, said: "They remain invisible unless they're counted."

The counters, many of whom are homeless and were paid \$7.50 an hour, got six hours of training. In New York City alone, 2,167 sites were tagged as places where the homeless congregate.

Cold, wet weather in New York City was expected to help census takers find and count more homeless people.

"I expect that it will drive more people indoor to the shelters and to the subway system," Dwayne Mayes, a homeless man working as a district supervisor for the homeless count.

From 6 p.m. to midnight, the count was focused on shelters, armories, missions, church basements, flophouses and hotels charging less than \$12 a night.

A 2 a.m. to 4 a.m. phase 2 zeroed in on bus stations, all-night restaurants, subway cars, underpasses, bridges, railroad trestles, cars, bank machine vestibules, park benches, trash bins and other homeless hangouts.

In the third phase, lasting until about 8 a.m., counters were to interview people coming in and out of abandoned buildings. For their own safety, the counters have been told not to enter the buildings.