

Volunteers and homeless try to make census count

Workers fan out across the South Bay to gather data about the homeless to ensure federal money is allocated properly.

By Nick Green

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Just after 11 p.m., Richard Green and Scott Kushigemachi set out from Gardena in a chugging Honda, peering through raindrops sprinkling on the windshield.

Their charge: to count the homeless in an unincorporated area of homes and industrial sites bounded by Normandie Avenue, 223rd Street, the Harbor (110) Freeway and Sepulveda Boulevard.

Torrance resident Kushigemachi, 22, is an English literature graduate student at California State University, Long Beach with a penchant for the poetry of late San Pedro writer Charles Bukowski and an interest in the sociology of homelessness.

The grizzled Green, 52, who sported several days of gray stubble, is formerly homeless, familiar with the favored routes and haunts of those who live on the streets.

"You may not see too many people out," Green advised as the pair began their search Wednesday. "Most of them went into shelters because it started raining.

"You've still got your hard core out there who have their own little shacks, their own little spots. And some people just don't like shelters."

2 among 30 volunteers

Green and Kushigemachi were among about 30 volunteers who fanned out from Gardena to census tracts across the South Bay including areas in Lawndale, Lomita, Torrance, Carson and Redondo Beach.

Others, wearing bright orange baseball caps emblazoned with the words "Everyone Counts 2005

Homeless County in L.A.," set out from bases in San Pedro and Inglewood.

The effort came on the second day of an unprecedented three-day drive to tally the homeless by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, an independent agency set up by the county and the city of Los Angeles to deal with the issue regionally.

"This count is important for several reasons," said Alexandria Bristow, a member of the agency's emergency response team who was taking part in the count. "It lets us assess the demographics of the huge homeless population -- it's estimated there are 84,000 homeless persons in Los Angeles county and city. Once we have a better idea of the exact numbers in the exact areas, that gives us the opportunity to provide the correct amount of services and the right type of services."

The federal government mandated the count. At stake: the more than \$52 million in federal money allocated to about 150 programs for the homeless in metropolitan Los Angeles operated by 75 nonprofit agencies.

The rough street count in a representative sampling of county census tracts was supplemented by phone calls asking for similar figures from jails, rehabilitation facilities, shelters and motels that accept government vouchers available to those seeking emergency shelter. In addition, about 3,300 surveys consisting of 25 questions will be conducted with the homeless in an effort to paint a more detailed picture.

Complete results are expected this summer.

But the street count was ground zero for the effort.

Unpaid volunteers were teamed with the homeless or formerly homeless who were paid \$10 an hour. Given the size of the census tracts in the suburban South Bay most drove rather than walked.

Equipped with tally sheets for toting up the number of homeless men, women, children, families, people sleeping in cars or living in camper shells, enumerators covered their assigned area block by block, carefully marking maps with a highlighting pen delineating their route.

"If you see someone sleeping and you can't tell if it's a man or a woman make a hash mark here," said Pat Zerounin, project manager for the research firm hired to ensure a statistically accurate count before one team headed out.

In the relatively affluent South Bay it wasn't always easy for volunteers to find the homeless.

"The area you guys sent me in was a very, very rich area," said Mark James, 40. "Some of these homes had to be million-dollar homes."

Homeless in surprising areas

But the homeless were also found in surprising places.

Pamela Houston, 48, had once lived in an abandoned house when she was homeless for two years with a 6-year-old child. (Today her daughter attends Carson's California State University, Dominguez Hills, she said proudly.)

But even she was shocked to find a single mother and her two children living behind the South Bay Galleria.

"I was very surprised how many homeless people were in the Torrance area," she said. "There were a lot of people sleeping in parks."

Green and Kushigemachi had more trouble finding the homeless as they quietly cruised the streets and alleys of their assigned area.

"There ain't nobody pushing baskets around here," Green said. "The grass (in front yards) is too groomed, there's no bars on the windows."

But with Green's practiced eyes they carefully inspected abandoned homes and stores, industrial areas and embankments next to the Harbor Freeway for signs of encampments or bedrolls.

"I used to sleep out in the streets in the middle of the night with no place to go," Green said. "A lot of places you can't get a job because you don't have an address. You wonder: "How am I ever

going to get out of this?' "

In the early hours of Thursday they eventually returned with an unmarked tally sheet to the site where enumerators had gathered.

But others, said Zerounin, had encountered more women living on the streets than she had expected. The homeless were also found living in industrial parks, areas that can either be devoid of them or relatively quiet oases where those who live on the streets can sleep relatively undisturbed.

"In some areas we would expect to find nothing and zero is just as valid as any other sort of number," she said. "We want to get it right."