

Session 1B:

The Importance of Numbers

Estimates and Public Policy: The Politics
of Numbers

Anna Kondratas

Images of the Homeless: Public Views and Media
Messages

Barrett A. Lee, Bruce G. Link, and Paul A. Toro

Politics, Policy Making, Data, and the Homeless

Eleanor Chelimsky

Estimates and Public Policy: The Politics of Numbers

Anna Kondratas

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Abstract

Estimates of the number of homeless persons in the United States are frequently said to range from 250,000 to three million. In fact, the latter number is an invalid guesstimate that developed staying power for political reasons. National estimates of homeless persons based on explainable methodologies actually range from 230,000 to 736,000, with the most likely estimates around the half-million mark. Despite the confrontational politics surrounding the numbers issue in the 1980s, a consensus is developing in the 1990s among private groups, including some major advocacy organizations, and all levels of government regarding policy direction in assistance programs for the homeless. There is widespread recognition that the goal should be to end homelessness, not simply to provide emergency assistance. Permanent housing solutions for special populations are needed in the context of renewed efforts to combat poverty.

In the public debate about the policy implications of divergent national estimates of the numbers of homeless persons, a common assumption is that the estimates vary widely and inexplicably—anywhere from a few hundred thousand to three million or more. Those who do try to explain the odd discrepancy between the extremes seem to assume that any count is politically motivated. They say that it depends on how one defines homelessness and who is counting. In other words, the implication is that numbers derive from policy and politics, rather than the other way around.

Given such perceptions, it is not surprising that some who have neither the time nor, perhaps, the resources to judge the accuracy of estimates begin to feel that the truth must be somewhere in between, as if a mathematical average were equivalent to a political compromise. Others will believe the message if they like the messenger. In a recent book on homelessness, for example, the author confesses that he trusts estimates “made by people who live where ‘the rubber meets the road’ . . . rather more than the bright theorists tucked away in ivory towers.”¹ Although many statistics are politically controversial, it is probably safe to say that the debate on homelessness during the past decade represents the apogee of political numerology. It is worth reviewing just how this came to pass.

1980-1984: The first phase of the debate

In testimony prepared for the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on the District of Columbia on September 1, 1980, members of the Community for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV)

presented some sketchy data on shelters in about 25 locales and the number of homeless in 14 cities.² They had obtained the numbers from service providers and others who ventured guesses because they were asked. They had no idea how to do this systematically, and apparently called either people they knew or organizations they thought might know something. Thus, the report was done with no methodological parameters or recognition of research standards. CCNV had been specifically asked for information on numbers by the committee prior to testifying and, ironically, expressed some frustration that they would be unable to include 1980 census data because the data would not yet be available.³ CCNV members also called a few federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), asking for information on the numbers of homeless. In their testimony, they noted that nobody seemed to have any numbers and that the agencies had cited the difficulty of collecting such information. In concluding its testimony, CCNV observed: "We believe that the federal government has a responsibility to be concerned about the problem of homelessness and to be party to its solution. By compiling concrete facts and figures about the type and number of people who are living on America's streets, the federal government can dispel . . . stereotypes. . . . We must move beyond the question of how many and whom, before we can begin to resolve the problem."⁴

The local estimates in the CCNV report are more intriguing than informative. Some appear to be for metropolitan areas, including both cities and suburbs, whereas others appear to be for cities only. Some appear to be point-in-time counts; others are annual counts. Most are numbers of individuals, but one estimate was number of families, with no indication of family size. The bottom line is that CCNV's data are unusable as a means of extrapolating the number of America's homeless, and that is probably why no total appears in the 1980 testimony.

One thing the testimony did make clear is that homelessness already seemed to be a growing and changing problem in the late 1970s. The reasons cited by those working with the homeless included inflation, unemployment, deinstitutionalization, a shortage of affordable housing, the breakdown of traditional social structures, reductions in social spending, and social indifference. This was all before the Reagan Administration, in a year of recession and double-digit inflation that saw a steeper rise in poverty than occurred in any year in the decade preceding it or the decade following it. Yet public attention did not focus on homelessness, and few were listening to the advocates who were raising alarms about the suffering of those in the streets and about their increasing numbers.

For a broad-based political campaign to develop, a political opportunity was necessary. In 1982, the third consecutive year of recession and high unemployment, the focus of political debate in the nation's capital was very much the Reagan Administration's economic policies and budget. Also in 1982, CCNV reissued its report on homelessness, this time with a glossy cover and the addition of a lengthy anti-Reagan-Administration diatribe.⁵ This edition of the CCNV report claimed that the 1980 version provided the information to support the conclusion that there were 2.2 million homeless persons in 1980—1 percent of the population—and added, “we are convinced the number of homeless people in the United States could reach 3 million or more during 1983.”⁶ To anyone familiar with the first report, this was a clear leap of fantasy. Even the upper range of the estimates CCNV presented in 1980 would yield local rates of homelessness ranging from only several hundredths of a percentage point to half a percentage point in half the cities enumerated, and only a generous method of calculation shows three individual estimates (not three cities but three individual estimates) that might indicate homelessness rates over 1 percent. There was no way to total the dubious data in any case. But in the political climate of the time, the number was immediately seized upon by opponents of the Reagan Administration as proof positive of the pernicious effects of Reagan's policies, even though these policies were still primarily on paper, and of the recession, which was itself attributed to Reagan's policies. The numbers and these causal connections were, for the most part, uncritically accepted and propagated by the media and became conventional wisdom through repetition. A review of the major network news archives at Vanderbilt University for 1981-1982, for example, shows a significant increase in stories on poverty, hunger, and homelessness, with far more frequent causal linkage with federal policy and the federal budget than in preceding years, even though, as noted in CCNV's testimony, all the conditions leading to rising homelessness had already existed in 1980.

This paper deals with the CCNV report at such length only because it was politically significant and set the stage for all subsequent discussions of numbers of homeless persons. It is noteworthy that this is the *only* source that purports to have documented two to three million homeless, although the National Coalition for the Homeless certainly propagated both the number and the impression that this was a legitimate estimate actually based on someone's calculations. Perhaps many of its members believed this to be the case; if so, it is clear that no one questioned how the numbers were derived. The way the advocates both defined the scope of the problem (millions and growing) and redefined the causes (Reagan budget cuts and

Reagan-created unemployment) had inevitable political and policy consequences.

The focus of the increasingly well-organized advocacy on behalf of homeless persons became a push for increased funding for emergency shelter and food. Because numbers in the millions were inconsistent with the actual characteristics of the majority of the homeless—persons with mental illness or substance abuse problems and single-female-headed households—one heard more and more about the “new homeless.” This group was defined as ordinary, even middle-class, Americans fallen on hard times for whom government was responsible, a claim not borne out by analysis.⁷ All these new homeless needed was “housing, housing, housing,” in the famous slogan of the advocates, coined by Robert Hayes, but because the federal budget, in this view, clearly foreclosed that option, the movement was galvanized by and derived sympathy from the demand for emergency shelter and food. Regardless of how extensive or real the new homelessness was, there was certainly a new view of homelessness. Not surprisingly, public support for the homeless rose. The homeless were increasingly visible, but not yet familiar, and the public was legitimately trying to understand why these unfortunate persons seemed inexplicably so much more numerous. The concept “millions of homeless” was inconsistent with a relatively small proportion of extremely poor persons beset with multiple ongoing problems. If millions were homeless, it was plausible that unemployment and social program cuts were driving ordinary working Americans to the streets, as advocates maintained. And if the homeless were primarily middle-class and working poor citizens simply hit by sudden economic calamity, then emergency assistance, which advocates were seeking, was clearly appropriate. It is not coincidental that the first federal program to assist the homeless was placed under the aegis of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which provides temporary assistance in the wake of natural disasters. Emergency assistance, of course, was and is totally inadequate to address the root causes of homelessness or to help persons who were actually homeless—most of whom did not fit into the new-homeless mold—back into the mainstream. In other words, the exaggerated number had a strong bearing on this misperception of the causes of homelessness and characteristics of the homeless, which in turn led to ill-conceived policy. The emphasis on emergency assistance was a tactic that a number of advocates themselves later came to question.⁸

In 1983, the Office of Policy Development and Research at HUD, in response to increasing public concern about homelessness, decided to try to describe the scope and characteristics of America’s

homeless population. As noted above, advocates themselves had suggested that this was a proper role for the federal government and a necessary precondition for developing effective policy. The HUD study, as it came to be known, was the first serious and systematic attempt to describe the “concrete facts and figures,” the “how many and who” that the CCNV had called for in 1980.

The HUD study was done by professional social scientists, whose tenure at HUD predated the Reagan Administration and whose civil service jobs were secure from the caprices of political appointees. Their sources were advocates for the homeless, local social service providers and shelter operators, and numerous local studies. Using four different approaches whose methodology and limitations were meticulously explained, the HUD researchers concluded that the “most reliable range” for the number of homeless persons on an average night in the period December 1983 to January 1984 was 250,000 to 350,000.⁹

Subsequent interviews with most of the principals involved in the preparation of the report, as well as their testimony before congressional committees, indicate that there was no political “hidden agenda” in preparing the report, no instructions to career employees to rig the study to minimize the problem. (If there had been, it is highly unlikely that the administration would have gotten away with it.) In fact, the HUD researchers themselves, in whom advocates had inculcated an expectation of millions as successfully as in the general public, were surprised at the national total, but there was no other way to add up the numbers. They were surprised because the local homeless estimates they had used were not very different from those used in the CCNV report. In fact, one of their methods, for the ten cities that were in both the 1980 CCNV report and the 1984 HUD report, yielded an estimate 30 percent higher than CCNV’s.¹⁰ The truth is, there was no method of calculation that could derive two or three million from the CCNV numbers, or from any local advocate estimates at that time. Those who quibble about the “methodological deficiencies” of the HUD report have never been able to explain how these alleged deficiencies could have led to an estimating error of 900 percent, how relying on inflated local estimates by advocates could have resulted in an undercount, or why, concerned as they are with proper counting techniques, these critics prefer to believe in an estimate based on no method at all.

In retrospect, it is hard to understand the fury with which the HUD study was greeted by advocates, media pundits, and sundry members of Congress. Hard to understand, that is, until one

remembers that the HUD report was released in May 1984, an election year, with a severe recession just ended and the “fairness” issue very much at the center of a strident domestic policy debate. The House Banking Committee Democrats, whose relations with HUD Secretary Samuel Pierce were openly hostile, were intent on attacking and embarrassing the administration and called a hearing. The chairman of the Housing Subcommittee of the Banking Committee compared the authors of the HUD study to Dr. Goebbels and Nazi propagandists. Public opinion was manipulated: network television cameras were present at the congressional hearings, and contrary to customary practice, critics of the administration, including the telegenic and flamboyant Mitch Snyder, testified earlier than administration witnesses, who were called up late in the afternoon after all television cameras had left.¹¹ Subsequently, the authors of the study were not only subjected to Freedom of Information Act requests for their study documentation, but also were harassed by civil and criminal lawsuits brought against them by advocates.

The effect of all this was a chilling, anti-rational political climate when it came to discussing numbers of homeless persons. The offensive against the HUD study by congressional Democrats and a few advocates appeared to have multiple purposes: to discredit the Reagan Administration, to protect the two-to-three-million number from closer scrutiny, and, by inference, to suggest that claiming significantly lower numbers was a politically motivated position. It was only natural that the groups for whom three million was a political statement suspected their political adversaries of playing numbers games as well. It was also natural that the wider advocacy community and liberal supporters, given the Reagan Administration’s stated position that homelessness was a local problem, found these accusations plausible and did not delve too deeply into where the three-million estimate came from. At the hearing, advocates expressed concern that public support for spending on the homeless would evaporate if the HUD numbers were believed. To his credit, the late Stewart B. McKinney (R-Conn.) suggested that the HUD study was irrelevant to policy; he pointed out that even “10,000 homeless is untenable,” and that Congress had not yet appropriated enough money to deal with the root causes of homelessness or faced the facts of the effects of deinstitutionalization and substance abuse on that population. He noted that he had sought support for a bill for the previous two and a half years, “and we cannot get the committee to hear it to do something about these people.”¹²

1984-1988: The second phase

The politicization of the numbers issue by advocates and other opponents of the administration had a sorry effect on the subsequent policy debate. One's use—or nonuse—of certain numbers came to define one's political position. Thus, the National Board, which administers FEMA's homeless funds, issued a report in March 1985 that spoke of percentage increases in homelessness without giving any baseline numbers. A month earlier, the draft prepared for the board by a consultant under the auspices of the United Way had concluded that the probable number of homeless persons in the United States was about 393,000 to 478,000, up about 10 percent from the year before.¹⁴ But after a meeting of the National Board—which consists of a FEMA representative and representatives of private charities that benefit from federal homeless funding—with its advisory committee, which included advocates, the report was suppressed and the meaningless final report was issued. The two versions bear little resemblance to one another. It is an open question whether this decision represented conscious disinformation, a self-righteous squelching of information perceived to be damaging to a higher cause, or simply a means of taking the easy way out of political controversy. Whatever the reason, it was an unfortunate decision for scholarly inquiry, suggesting both moral intimidation and censorship. Ironically, because a member of FEMA chairs the National Board, the Reagan Administration in effect participated in suppressing a report that would have given some credence to the earlier HUD study.

The annual U.S. Conference of Mayors' reports on homelessness also reported significant increases in the demand for emergency services year after year, again without providing baseline numbers.¹⁵ Surely the authors of these reports knew how many were being served if they knew by how much demand had gone up, but the baseline numbers would not indicate anything near millions of homeless, so they were omitted. Several liberal scholars, whose independent research was also turning up numbers more consistent with HUD's than with CCNV's, expressed some discomfiture to me at their findings, either because they did not look forward to being attacked by advocates or because they might be perceived as aiding and abetting conservative political positions. One scholar who did stand up forcefully for his own research findings found himself excoriated by his colleagues.¹⁶ The debate was no longer about accuracy but about political orthodoxy.

The next study of homelessness that tried to extrapolate a national homeless rate from research data was conducted for the National

Bureau of Economic Research by Richard B. Freeman and Brian Hall in 1986. Freeman and Hall had been studying homeless persons in New York City to try to understand the dynamics and duration of American homelessness. Their estimate for the total number of homeless persons in the United States in 1983 (the time of the HUD study) was 279,000, and they projected a range of 343,000 to 363,000 for 1985. Although they recognized these as “rough” estimates, they noted, “It is important to recognize that they are strongly inconsistent with the claim that 1 percent of Americans are homeless. For the number of homeless to be on the order of 2.2 million persons, the street to shelter population ratio would have to exceed our estimate by about tenfold, which even given the crude nature of our procedures seems highly implausible.”¹⁷ Even though Freeman and Hall determined that the “much-maligned HUD study was roughly correct,”¹⁸ their study received only brief coverage in some newspapers and had little impact on the policy debate.

In 1988, Martha Burt and Barbara Cohen of the Urban Institute prepared a report for the U.S. Department of Agriculture that provided the first probability-based national estimate of the number of homeless persons who use soup kitchens or shelters in large cities, that is, cities over 100,000 in population. According to Burt’s speech at a Heritage Foundation conference, these cities contain 25 percent of the American population, and “probably more than one-half of the homeless and three-quarters of the services are in those cities.”¹⁹ The study found that the number of homeless persons, including children, who were sheltered or used food services in these cities was 229,000 over a seven-day period in March 1987.²⁰ Again, this total represents sheltered and food-service-using, nonsheltered homeless persons in large cities and is a valid estimate of that population based on the methodology of the study.

Because of the high degree of public interest in the total national population of homeless persons, the authors did a projection, not contained in the study itself, based on the 229,000 number and reasonable assumptions about how many people did not use services and how many were homeless in places other than large cities. That projection, now well known, was 567,000 to 600,000.²¹ According to the author, “Those projections are probably on the high end, based on our desire to err on the side of generosity—as a government study, overestimating, rather than underestimating—to avoid getting into the same kinds of binds that the Department of Housing and Urban Development had gotten into before. But we believe that probably overestimates the size of the homeless population.”²² Because the assumptions for the projections were based at

least partially on local studies, whose quantity and quality have improved over time, Martha Burt offered, in a paper prepared for a recent Census Bureau conference, revised estimates based on new information and on corrections for several potential sources of bias. The results indicate that at the time of the Urban Institute study, the number of homeless persons could have been, under one set of assumptions, as low as 355,000 to 446,000, but more likely, according to Burt, was 446,000 to 501,000.²³

Several other numbers appear from time to time as national estimates. One is a number developed for the Committee for Food and Shelter by ICF, Inc., in December 1987. The Committee for Food and Shelter, of course, is now the National Alliance to End Homelessness, and the most recent edition of the study came out in June 1988, prepared by the Alliance Housing Council. Essentially, the study uses the HUD numbers as a base, making some upward adjustments for alleged deficiencies of the HUD numbers and then multiplying them by a factor of 20 percent a year. The 20 percent comes from an average increase in the demand for services reported in the U.S. Conference of Mayors' reports.²⁴ This is a very shaky way to construct an estimate. Not only is the percentage itself questionable, because it comes from averaging all the percentages (without baseline numbers) reported by the mayors without regard to city size, but an increase in the demand for services is not the same thing as an increase in the size of the homeless population. Nonetheless, even with these upward adjustments and annual increases that have to be taken on faith, the number of homeless given in the 1987 Committee for Food and Shelter report was 735,000, which became 736,000 in the 1988 version. The 1987 version, incidentally, did concede that if the homeless population grew at a lower rate, using as an example the rate of growth of the general population, then the number of homeless in 1988 would total 400,000.²⁵

The 735,000 number is sometimes mistakenly attributed to the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) because it appeared in an NAS publication,²⁶ but the publication was one that dealt with aspects of homelessness other than enumeration. It is not clear why the authors used this particular estimate, but it *is* clear that this is not an estimate the NAS produced or endorsed. William Tucker is credited with having estimated "about seven hundred thousand,"²⁷ but on inquiry, this turns out to be very much a seat-of-the-pants guesstimate based on the same assumptions, and the same misconceptions about the HUD numbers, as the ICF (Alliance) number. In a recent telephone conversation, Tucker conceded that this was probably an overestimate.²⁸ Finally, in a 1990 working document,

the Congressional Budget Office assumed a 5 percent annual growth rate and starting with 575,000—a figure within the range of the 567,000 to 600,000 estimate—projected a homeless population of 700,000 in 1991.²⁹ As independent researchers investigated the size of the homeless population, some using assumptions that exaggerated the extent of the problem, one thing became increasingly clear: the much-maligned HUD study was much closer to the mark than the ubiquitous, yet indefensible, CCNV guesstimate.

1989 to present: Progress on policy

As part of the 1990 decennial census, the Census Bureau conducted a street and shelter count and reported 178,828 persons in shelters and 49,793 persons at street locations, or a total of about 230,000.³⁰ Needless to say, the number was roundly denounced by advocacy organizations as a “laughable” undercount of the homeless population,³¹ a charge the advocacy organizations were prepared to make even before the number was released. At a meeting of the National Alliance to End Homelessness Roundtable on March 12, 1991, for example, which was attended by many of the larger national advocacy organizations, advocates coordinated their response to the upcoming census data, and discussed, among other things, putting the proper “spin” on them. The Census Bureau is well aware of the incompleteness and limitations of its data, and if one compares its number with the Urban Institute’s count of 229,000 service-using homeless persons in large cities in 1986, it is clear that the census, as one would expect from censuses, is an undercount. But it is far from laughable. Given the method used, the numbers are not inconsistent with the estimates of the studies described above, even those that rather arbitrarily pumped the numbers up into the 700,000 range. Critics of the census claim undercounts in various areas, but even if the count were increased by 100 percent, that would mean 460,000 homeless persons; a 200 percent increase would result in a figure of 690,000.

Though the street numbers are open to challenge, because no one knows how many homeless persons are “hidden,” the shelter numbers seem to be fairly solid. They are consistent with both the Urban Institute report and the national 1988 HUD shelter survey.³²

The total 1990 census shelter-occupancy count for cities over 100,000 only was 115,629; four years earlier, the Urban Institute had estimated 108,095. For the entire country, HUD found average nightly occupancy to be 180,000 in 1988, compared with the 1990 census count of 179,000.³³

The bottom line is that the range of legitimate estimates of the homeless population is 230,000 to 600,000, or, if one wants to relax research standards somewhat and also make undocumentable assumptions about rates of growth, from 230,000 to 736,000. That is not so divergent a range as to pose a public policy problem, because both extremes can probably be discounted. The 230,000 almost certainly represents an undercount, but there is no imaginable way to get a number above 700,000 without simply making things up. For planning purposes, the federal government has been using the Urban Institute's 567,000 to 600,000 estimate and will continue to do so, in order to err on the side of overestimation rather than underestimation. When the aggregate number is broken down into meaningful segments—the mentally ill, substance abusers, families, and others—policy development and program planning become even more manageable. Because the housing solution for each segment of the literally homeless population is also appropriate for those sharing the characteristics of that segment who may be at risk of homelessness, overestimating, even by 100 percent, is not a serious policy issue. If there were only 300,000 homeless persons and permanent housing solutions were provided for 600,000, there would be poor people for whom the housing would be appropriate. More realistically, however, because current efforts are insufficient to provide permanent housing with appropriate services for even 300,000, the issue is moot.

This paper has not, thus far, discussed definitions and the effect of varying definitions of homelessness on the numbers. Differences in the definitions of homelessness—such as including or not including certain types of shelters or persons using vouchers in commercial hotels—might account for differences in the thousands or tens of thousands among the various estimates, but could not explain differences of millions. Essentially, the common understanding of homelessness, both in studies and in public perception as expressed through the media, is that the homeless are persons who sleep in the streets, parks, cars, and so on, as well as persons in emergency and other temporary shelters. This definition—the homeless as the street-and-shelter population—has a certain logic and sense from a policy perspective.

Unfortunately, ever since the late 1980s as it became increasingly clear that the three-million number was essentially indefensible, there has been a concerted effort to explain the number by backing into it, as it were. Some refer to the three-million figure as an “annual count”³⁴—not the number of people who *are* homeless, but the number who may experience a spell of homelessness at some time during the course of a year—to make it more plausible, though

it was nothing of the sort. It was never a count at all, annual or otherwise. The fact that it has a little more plausibility as an annual count does not make it any more valid. Others suggest that this number refers to the number of homeless if one includes doubled-up families and extremely poor persons living in substandard housing. A case could be made that some doubled-up families are homeless, but certainly such families are not generically homeless, and people living in substandard housing are people living in substandard housing, not homeless. It seems a shame that the attempts to justify a fictitious number result in widening the definition of homelessness and thereby increasing the population pool eligible to receive funding for the homeless. A larger eligible population reduces the resources available to help end the tragedy of the literally homeless, in whose name the resources were obtained. I believe we can devise solutions to homelessness and provide the funding to end it, but it is hard to hit a moving target and even harder to cover an expanding target, and it is impossible to solve all the problems of poverty with homeless program resources.

This is not just an idle worry. The McKinney Act definition of homelessness, when read in its entirety and in the context of the preamble to the act, essentially defines homelessness as most researchers and the public have generally understood it. But it is vague, and specific phrases in the definition, if taken literally and in isolation, could justify even a traveling salesman's being considered homeless.³⁵ At HUD, the broadness of the definition has not been considered a drawback, because it allows for flexibility and for exceptions in unique circumstances, but it has also invited abuse, to the detriment of the homeless. Moreover, even when no abuse is involved, some well-meaning organizations have been requesting resources to assist boarder babies, troubled youths, the mentally retarded, nonhomeless mentally ill persons, poor people in substandard or overcrowded housing, migrant workers, and other needy populations. The argument advanced by these organizations is that these needy groups are covered by the McKinney Act.

It is clear that homelessness is a manifestation of extreme poverty and that it is interrelated with other social problems, such as substance abuse, mental illness, and domestic violence. From a policy and resource-allocation perspective, it is helpful to understand the interrelationships, but not to conflate the problems. Indeed, Robert Ellickson has made an excellent case that policy makers ought even to distinguish between the street population and the sheltered homeless.³⁶ An understanding of why the increase in the shelter population is not necessarily reducing the size of the street population (but drawing people directly from housing) may lead to better

policies for reducing this “supply effect,” which provides perverse incentives that promote dependency. This understanding may also lead to more effective targeting of assistance programs.

In the final analysis, the total number of homeless persons, when homelessness has such a broad definition, is really less important than segmentation of the homeless population into meaningful components, so that policy makers can design appropriate programs for specific groups.

Conclusion

For those who understand numbers, the so-called numbers debate has long been over. There is always a need for more research and better data, but that is not a topic of debate. The three-million number, however, has been repeated so often that it is ingrained in the public consciousness, and advocates continue to repeat it routinely to keep it in the public consciousness. The media and even many respectable research papers, including a recent one from the Census Bureau,³⁷ continue to pay lip service to this number as the top of a range of estimates, as though it *were* an estimate. It is important, if we are to get on with the serious work of addressing homelessness, that this perception be changed. Good numbers are important for good policy. When the numbers ranged from hundreds of thousands to millions, and no one knew whom to believe, federal funding decisions were based primarily on political considerations. One congresswoman, for example, at an early debate on emergency assistance, suggested that the amount appropriated for homeless programs should be equal to what the administration was spending in El Salvador.³⁸ The three-million estimate led first to a distorted understanding of what was causing homelessness, and thus delayed more effective responses. Subsequently, adhering to the three-million estimate required broadening the definition to maintain plausibility. Such broadening leads to poor targeting of scarce resources, so that the hardest to serve, those on the streets, are ill served and continue to suffer on the streets even as the shelter-and-service network is rapidly expanding. In spite of the major increases in federal, state, and local spending on homeless persons in the past decade,³⁹ governments clearly are not doing enough, or are doing at least some things wrong, or both. A failure to confront the numbers issue head-on and to develop a workable common ground has been part of the problem. The Bush Administration has a policy goal of ending homelessness. In that context, an attack on the advocates’ numbers should be perceived not as an attack on the mutual goal of

dealing with the issues, but as an effort to define the issues so they can be better addressed.

One fear frequently expressed by advocates is that a consensus on numbers in the hundreds-of-thousands will reduce funding for programs for the homeless. But the half-million range was the operating assumption of the Bush Administration when it asked for significant expansions and reforms of federal efforts to assist the homeless. Shelter Plus Care, for example, is a major new program that would provide over \$380 million in federal funds over two years, matched dollar-for-dollar by services at the local level, but would meet the permanent housing needs of only about 700 persons, if the administration receives what it requested. This is a program well targeted to the neediest street-and-shelter population. Developing special-needs housing is expensive. Not only would a reduction of effort be unwarranted in programs targeted to the homeless, but it is clear, given the numbers and dollars involved, that efforts to end homelessness are doomed to failure unless there is concurrent reform of various parts of the social welfare system, from mental health care to alcohol and drug rehabilitation to family assistance. Welfare reform, service integration, and intensification of antipoverty efforts, including solutions to the problem of affordable housing for the poor, are essential components of any long-term plan to end homelessness. HUD has taken the lead within the administration to develop such a plan, appropriately called the Federal Plan to Help End Homelessness. Seventeen federal agencies are participating in developing and implementing this plan. It seeks to link housing and services; improve coordination among all federal, state, and local programs; and better target available resources, including mainstream programs.

Not only do the homeless need better access to mainstream programs, because the resources in these programs are far more substantial than those targeted exclusively to the homeless, but the programs themselves have to be integrated far more cohesively than they are now to keep poor people from dropping through the holes of the social safety net in the first place. The safety-net programs, not homeless assistance programs, should be the first line of battle in homelessness prevention efforts. The Federal Plan to Help End Homelessness is also addressing homelessness prevention.

In spite of the challenges and policy disagreements of the past decade, considerable progress has been made in developing partial solutions to homelessness over the past few years. Dialogue and working relationships have been developed among private groups, including some major advocacy organizations, and all levels of

government to coordinate policy direction, resources, and action. It is hoped that these productive debates and ties will continue in spite of the unproductive numbers debate. A surprising consensus exists on what needs to be done, and sufficient information is known on the numbers and characteristics of homeless persons to act now. Action is imperative, even as knowledge continues to be refined. And if advocates, service providers, scholars, and local, state, and federal government officials can make significant progress working together to end homelessness in the next decade, the numbers debate will be history.

Author

Anna Kondratas is assistant secretary for community planning and development, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Endnotes

1. Robert C. Coates, *A Street is Not a Home* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990), 26.
2. The Community for Creative Non-Violence, "A Forced March to Nowhere" (Report for the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on the District of Columbia, Washington, DC, 1980).
3. The Community for Creative Non-Violence, letter to Ronald V. Dellums, Chair of the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on the District of Columbia, July 29, 1980.
4. The Community for Creative Non-Violence, "A Forced March to Nowhere," 71-72.
5. Mary E. Hombs and Mitch Snyder, *Homelessness in America: A Forced March to Nowhere* (Washington, DC: Community for Creative Non-Violence, 1983).
6. *Ibid.*, xvi.
7. David Whitman, "Shattering Myths About the Homeless," *U.S. News and World Report* (March 20, 1989), 17-18; Gregg Easterbrook, "Housing: Examining a Media Myth," *The Atlantic* (October 1983), 10-24.
8. Kim Hopper, "Advocacy for the Homeless in the 1980s," in *Homeless in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 169.
9. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, "A Report to the Secretary on the Homeless and Emergency Shelters" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, April 1984), 18.

10. S. Anna Kondratas, "A Strategy for Helping America's Homeless" (Heritage Foundation Background, Washington, DC, 1985).
11. Joint Hearing Before the House Subcommittee on Housing and Community Development of the Committee on Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs and the House Subcommittee on Manpower and Housing of the Committee on Government Operations, *HUD Report on Homelessness*, 98th Cong., 2d sess., 1984.
12. *Ibid.*, 9-10.
13. The National Board, "Emergency Food and Shelter Program Study of Homelessness" (Report by the National Board, Washington, DC, March 1, 1985), 2.
14. The National Board, "Draft Study of Homelessness" (Report by the National Board, Washington, DC, February 1985) 27 and table 2.2.
15. U.S. Conference of Mayors, "The Continuing Growth of Hunger, Homelessness, and Poverty in American Cities: 1987" (Washington, DC: U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1987). The Mayors' Conference's growth estimates appear in a series of annual survey-based reports dating from 1984 to the present.
16. Peter H. Rossi, "No Good Applied Social Research Goes Unpunished," *Society* (November 1987), 80.
17. Richard B. Freeman and Brian Hall, "Permanent Homelessness in America?" (Working Paper No. 2013, Cambridge, MA, 1986, National Bureau of Economic Research), 7.
18. *Ibid.*
19. The Heritage Foundation and the *American Spectator*, "Rethinking Policy on Homelessness," *The Heritage Lecture Series* 194 (1988):16.
20. Martha R. Burt and Barbara E. Cohen, *Feeding the Homeless: Does the Prepared Meals Provision Help?* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 1988), xi. Report prepared for the Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture and submitted to Congress October 31, 1988.
21. Martha R. Burt and Barbara E. Cohen, *America's Homeless: Numbers, Characteristics and the Programs That Serve Them* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 1989), 29.
22. The Heritage Foundation and the *American Spectator*, 17.
23. Martha R. Burt, "Developing the Estimate of 500,000-600,000 Homeless People in the United States in 1987," (Bureau of the Census Conference on Enumerating Homeless Persons, Washington, DC, 1991). Martha Burt, telephone conversation with Mark Johnston, May 6, 1991.
24. The National Alliance to End Homelessness, *Housing and Homelessness* (Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness, 1988), 3. The Committee for Food and Shelter, Inc., *Characteristics and Housing Needs of the Homeless: Final Report* (Washington, DC: The Committee for Food and Shelter, 1987).

25. Committee for Food and Shelter, 1987, 2.
26. National Academy of Sciences, Health and Human Needs Committee on Health Care for Homeless People, Institute of Medicine, *Homelessness* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1988).
27. William Tucker, "Where Do the Homeless Come from?" *National Review* (September 1987), 34.
28. William Tucker, telephone conversation with Mark Johnston, April 18, 1991.
29. Patrick Purcell, "Preliminary Cost Estimate for the Homeless Outreach Act of 1990" (Congressional Budget Office memorandum to Deborah Colton, Washington, DC, 1990), 1.
30. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, press release (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, April 12, 1991), 2.
31. *Washington Times*, April 18, 1991, A5.
32. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, "A Report on the 1988 National Survey of Shelters for the Homeless" (Washington, DC, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1989).
33. *Ibid.*, 2.
34. E.g., Coates, *A Street Is Not a Home*, 26.
35. The definition is in the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, sec. 103(2)(1), 101 Stat. 485 (1987).
36. Robert C. Ellickson, "The Homelessness Muddle," *The Public Interest* 99 (1990): 46.
37. Cynthia M. Taeuber, "Counting the Nation's Homeless Population in the 1990 Census" (Paper presented at Bureau of the Census Conference on Enumerating Homeless Persons, Washington, DC, 1991), 7.
38. Joint Hearing, *HUD Report on Homelessness*, 98th Congress, 2d sess., 1984, 300.
39. The first federal program created in the 1980s to address the needs of homeless persons specifically was FEMA's Emergency Food and Shelter Program. This program was designed to help both the homeless and other persons meet their emergency housing and food needs. It was first funded in 1983 at \$50 million. At present, in 1991, the federal government is spending \$884 million for programs targeted to homeless persons, a 1,600 percent increase over 1983 funding. Combined with more traditional programs, such as Social Security and Medicaid, federal spending for the homeless is well over \$1.5 billion in 1991. State and local spending has also increased since the early 1980s. An indicator of the increased public commitment at all levels to address homelessness is evidenced by the fact that between 1984 and 1988, the number of shelter beds almost tripled, from 100,000 to 275,000. These shelters received two-thirds of their funds from government sources and one-third from private sources.

