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Critics Dispute LAPD'S Assessment of Shelter

Homeless Advocates Call Police Tally of Empty Skid Row Beds 'Creative Accounting'

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LOS ANGELES - For the homeless, the Drop-In Center is one of the last places to get a bed on Los Angeles' Skid Row. Unlike the missions, which give out tickets for beds earlier in the day, the Drop-In Center doesn't assign beds until 6 p.m.

"By 6:30, we're pretty much full," said Connie Tyson, the center's program manager. "We always have a line. "

So when the Los Angeles Police Department publicizes that there are plenty of empty beds on Skid Row every night, service providers like Tyson wonder where, exactly, those beds are. Because, they say, there are plenty of takers.

The Drop-In Center, an emergency shelter run by the nonprofit organization Volunteers of America, is one of seven shelters the LAPD calls every night to count available shelter beds.

"We want to be able to say there are beds available. These people just don't want them," said Andrew Smith, captain of the LAPD's Central division, which patrols Skid Row.

Central division has been keeping track of available shelter beds since an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit made it illegal to arrest homeless people for sitting or sleeping on the street.

The basis for the ACLU case, which the city may soon appeal, is the lack of available shelter beds.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with the ACLU that, with only 14,000 emergency shelter beds to accommodate Los Angeles County's 90,000 homeless people, the police cannot arrest people for being on the street.

But Smith says beds are not the issue on Skid Row.

The empty beds that his officers count are the basis for the LAPD's argument that people on the streets are "shelter-resistant."

It's a characterization with which some homeless advocates take issue.

"It suits their purposes to say that people won't go inside," said Pete White, co-director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network, a homeless advocacy group. "From a legal perspective, it's important for them to show that there are beds available each and every time they send officers into the community to arrest people. It's the justification for their arrests. It's the glue that holds their strategy together."

Smith said that the LAPD no longer arrests people on Skid Row at night and that the bed count is not intended to justify arrests but to make a point.

After a woman was stomped to death on Skid Row in May, Smith told the media there were 82 beds available for women in area shelters the night of the murder. At a news conference, he said he was frustrated because the woman chose to be on the street.

"The point I'm trying to make is that they're there because they want to be there, whether it's because they have a mental disability or because they are there to party," Smith said this week. "There are beds downtown. People are choosing not to use them. You can't shoot up in your [shelter] room."

Central division counts 70 to 140 beds each night among the seven shelters.

While this number is miniscule compared to the 1,500 to 2,000 people sleeping on the streets of Skid Row each night, it continues to surprise homeless advocates, who say shelters are overflowing.

In response to the LAPD's count, community organizations conducted their own bed census.

The Community Action Network, in collaboration with the Downtown Women's Center and LAMP Community, interviewed shelter providers to find out just how many beds go unused every night.

"The vast majority of the organizations providing shelter are filled to capacity and are turning people away

every day," said Becky Dennison, co-director of the Community Action Network. "We found there are absolutely no emergency beds for men available. Every time we found available beds, there were at least that many people in line trying to access them."

One place with available beds, Smith said, is Transition House. Police logs show 25 to 50 available beds at the shelter every night.

Bertha Martinez is Transition House's executive director. She said in September that the LAPD had never called anyone at her program to find out whether beds were available. If they had called, she said, they wouldn't have found 50 beds.

"Every night, we do intakes, and there may be an empty bed because someone has moved into more-permanent housing," she said. But Martinez said she usually fills that bed "the next day."

Police logs also show available beds at Union Rescue Mission.

Liz Mooradian, director of public relations at the Mission, said men's beds at that shelter are filled every night. She said there are some available women's beds on top bunks, but a count of those beds can be "misleading."

"If you have an older woman, she can't climb up there," Mooradian said. "So with bunk beds, sometimes the top bed goes unused."

Dennison said the LAPD's count "includes some beds that aren't being filled because of funding issues or criteria that a majority of the people on the street don't meet," including gender and disability restrictions.

Smith said he is not concerned with whether the empty beds are unfunded.

"My concern is law enforcement," he said. "I don't know how many of those are paid for or not. They say the bed is vacant, and we put down that the bed is vacant. I don't know for a fact that those beds aren't actually available."

He said that, if those beds are empty and people cannot actually use them, "then that's a damn shame."

"But it's not the police's damn shame," he said.

Smith said that, if program beds are empty because some homeless people "don't want to go into programs, that's not my concern, but it does help make my point: People don't want to go into programs; people don't want to get off the street."

White said the LAPD's bed count includes beds the shelters hold for police referrals.

Tyson said the Drop-In Center holds seven beds for police referrals every night, and those beds are open until 3 a.m.

Orlando Ward, head of public relations for the Midnight Mission, said his organization holds 25 beds every night for police referrals.

"If the police haven't called by 11 p.m., we give them away," he said. "There's usually never a bed left unslept-in on any given night."

It is unclear whether the beds the shelters hold for the LAPD are included in the bed count, in part because the various shelters hold the beds for different lengths of time.

Logs from Central division show that police call times vary, as well. If an officer calls at 11 p.m. to find out the number of available beds, the result might be different than if he calls at 3 in the morning.

UCLA law professor and homeless advocate Gary Blasi called the count "creative accounting."

"You can manufacture vacancies just like you can manufacture profits, but at the end of the day, that means what it means for ordinary people," Blasi said.

Service providers concede some people do not want to sleep in the shelters.

"Yes, there are people who won't go to Union Rescue Mission," Dennison said. "But there are plenty of people who will."

Mooradian agrees.

"We only allow two bags," she said. "Some people have animals, some are living in cars, some have shopping carts."

Blasi said most people don't want to give up their worldly belongings.

"The price of a night off the street could mean giving up everything you have," he said.

The LAPD's message has become the central part of the discourse on the city's homeless issue, Blasi said, because the public wants to believe people are homeless through some fault of their own.

"That people are 'shelter-resistant' is the story people want to believe," he said. "And it's an uphill battle to convince them otherwise. It's an uncomfortable truth."

"But what's really uncomfortable is sleeping on the street."