



BRIEFING PAPER

Undercounting the Homeless **How the Bloomberg Administration's Homeless Survey** **Undercounts the Street Homeless and Misleads the Public** May 24, 2004

Introduction and Summary

For the second year the Bloomberg Administration has released a statistical estimate of New York City's street homeless population that dramatically undercounts the street homeless population. Indeed, the Bloomberg Administration actually claims that the number of homeless New Yorkers sleeping outdoors in Manhattan declined over the past year, despite abundant evidence – including City outreach and shelter data and reports from emergency food programs – that street homelessness is on the rise. Bloomberg Administration officials have refused to release the raw data from the two surveys, in effect prohibiting independent researchers from assessing the reliability of the Bloomberg Administration's claims and its survey methodology.

Last month the New York City Department of Homeless Services issued a report claiming that, on February 24th of this year, there were only 2,694 homeless people estimated to be sleeping outdoors in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Staten Island.¹ This figure included an estimated 1,482 people sleeping on Manhattan streets. Last year, the City claimed that, on February 25, 2003, there were 1,560 homeless New Yorkers sleeping on Manhattan streets.² Thus, the City claimed that the number of homeless people sleeping on the streets in Manhattan decreased by 5 percent over the last year.

This claim is contradicted by a wealth of other public data and by reports from outreach teams, emergency food providers, shelters serving homeless single individuals.

- **Homeless outreach teams**: City data, collected from outreach teams contracted by the Department of Homeless Services, actually reported an average 6.9 percent increase in the number of street homeless individuals contacted during the months preceding the survey.
- **Emergency food programs**: Emergency food providers, including some of the largest soup kitchens in Manhattan, reported that they served more homeless individuals over the past year – a recent study found that two-thirds of emergency food programs reported that more homeless people were seeking their help during the past year.
- **Shelters for homeless single adults**: In addition, the number of homeless single adults sleeping in municipal shelters – which historically correlates strongly with changes in the street homeless population – rose by 7.1 percent between the two nights of the surveys.
- **Additional public data**: Finally, the Department of Homeless Services' "statistical estimate" flew in the face of other public data, including Census Bureau studies, indicating much higher levels of street homelessness in New York City.

¹ New York City Department of Homeless Services, "Homeless Outreach Population Estimate (HOPE) 2004" (April 15, 2004).

² New York City Department of Homeless Services, "Homeless Outreach Population Survey Results" (March 27, 2003).

Simply put, the results of the City’s survey dramatically undercount the street homeless population in New York and paint a distorted portrait of street homelessness. Moreover, they threaten to mislead the public about the scale of the problem and even threaten to reduce vital funding and services for street homeless New Yorkers. This briefing paper discusses the recent surveys in the context of historical undercounts of street homelessness. The paper describes:

- *City outreach and shelter data, as well as reports from emergency food providers, that contradict the Bloomberg Administration’s claim that street homelessness in Manhattan declined over the past year;*
- *Methodological flaws in the recent Department of Homeless Services survey that resulted in an undercount, including the faulty survey design and execution;*
- *Additional data that call into question the City’s flawed estimate, including comparisons with Census Bureau data and additional reports from homeless outreach teams;*
- *Historical attempts to “count” the street homeless population in New York City and elsewhere, and the flawed results of those attempts;*
- *How the recent undercount threatens to mislead the public and reduce funding and services for homeless New Yorkers; and*
- *Better ways to measure street homelessness than the City’s recent “point-in-time” estimate, including enhance use of management information systems.*

Simply put, the lesson of more than two decades of attempts to “count” the street homeless population – particularly in large cities like New York – is that there is no “right number.” The mobility and characteristics of the street homeless population and the complexity and vastness of New York City’s terrain make it impossible to arrive at a “point-in-time” count of street homelessness. However, there are effective ways to measure trends in the street homeless population that ought to be embraced by policymakers.

Finally, the briefing paper calls on the Bloomberg Administration to release the raw data gathered during the surveys to allow independent analysis and assessment of the City’s estimate, and outlines a genuine, proven plan to reduce street homelessness in New York City.

Part One:

The Department of Homeless Services Survey: Flawed Methodology Results in an Undercount

The Department of Homeless Services (DHS) survey, which was called the “Homeless Outreach Population Estimate,” relies on a flawed methodology that resulted in an undercount of the street homeless population in New York City. Data from City-funded outreach teams, shelters, and emergency food providers contradict the surveys’ claim that street homelessness actually declined in Manhattan by 5 percent over the past year. Moreover, flaws inherent in the execution of the street survey also contribute to the unreliability of its results. In addition, comparisons with other data sources and the complexity of street homelessness in Manhattan contribute to strong doubts about the reliability and accuracy of the DHS survey results. Finally, the DHS survey suffers from many of the same flaws as earlier attempts to measure street homelessness in New York City and elsewhere (which are described in the second part of this briefing paper).

A. The Survey Methodology and Results

The DHS survey is based on the same stratified sample methodology first utilized on a large scale in Chicago’s street survey of 1986 (described in the following section of this briefing paper).³ For the first year of the survey, DHS staff divided Manhattan island into 899 “super-blocks,” or districts comprising roughly four-to-six complete city blocks; the survey also included city parks such as Central Park. DHS staff then assigned these districts into “high,” “medium,” and “low” categories denoting presumed densities of homelessness. The “high” districts were said to have five or more homeless people, the “medium” districts between one and five people, and the “low” districts either one homeless person or none. To assign districts into these classifications, DHS staff consulted with the New York Police Department (NYPD) and homeless outreach teams contracted by DHS (particularly the Bowery Residents Committee, which is contracted for citywide outreach). DHS staff also consulted with Community Boards and other community groups, but the vast majority of information on “densities” of homelessness was garnered from the police department and outreach teams. Ultimately, DHS designated 54 districts (6 percent of the total) as “high,” 139 districts (15 percent) as “medium,” and 706 districts (79 percent) as “low.”

For subway stations, the survey utilized the same stratified sample methodology. Manhattan’s 143 subway stations were divided into 29 “high,” 31 “medium,” and 83 “low” stations. Information to classify subway stations was solicited from the Metropolitan Transit Authority and the transit police. The survey did not cover subway trains, nor did it cover abandoned buildings, tunnels, automobiles and other vehicles, or other semi-enclosed areas.

In 2003 DHS ultimately surveyed only 193 districts, or 21 percent of all Manhattan districts. The stratified sample included all of the “high” districts, 69 (or about half) of the “medium” districts, and only 70 (or 10 percent) of the “low” districts. Among subway stations, the survey covered 63 stations (or 44 percent of the total), including all of the “high” stations, 25 (81 percent) of the “medium” stations, and only 9 (11 percent) of the low stations.⁴

The 2003 survey was conducted between 12:00 midnight and 4:00 a.m. on February 25th (night of February 24th), an unusually cold winter night. DHS organized several hundred volunteers in teams of four to five persons to visit the sample districts armed with a short questionnaire. Volunteers were instructed to ask every person they encountered whether or not they were homeless, where they

³ Indeed, DHS staff consulted with Peter Rossi, the architect of the Chicago study, while first designing the survey in 2002.

⁴ New York City Department of Homeless Services, “Homeless Outreach Population Survey Results” (March 27, 2003).

currently reside, and then record some rudimentary demographic information (gender, age, and race/ethnicity). DHS' press office also widely publicized the survey to the news media, and many reporters and television news crews accompanied volunteers on the night of the survey.

For the 2004 survey, DHS essentially replicated the methodology utilized the previous year, but added the boroughs of Brooklyn and Staten Island to the coverage area – Brooklyn was divided into 1,745 districts, and Staten Island into 895 districts. Another significant change between 2003 and 2004 was the plan to count the number of people sleeping in subway cars at the terminal stations, or last stops, of several subway lines.⁵ In 2003, there was no attempt made to measure homelessness on subway trains.

However, in 2004, instead of using a stratified sample classification with three categories (“high,” “medium,” and “low”), only “high” and “low” categories were used. In Manhattan, “high” districts were those where two or more people were expected to be sleeping, while in Brooklyn and Staten Island such districts were those with one or more people expected. For the 2004 survey, all “high” districts were again surveyed, but only a small fraction of the so-called “low” districts was surveyed. As shown in Table 1, only 14 percent of districts were actually surveyed, and only 8 percent of the so-called “low” districts – which represented more than nine of every ten districts – were actually surveyed.

Table 1 PORTION OF THREE NEW YORK CITY BOROUGHS ACTUALLY COVERED DURING THE FEBRUARY 2004 STREET HOMELESS SURVEY				
	Total for Three Boroughs	Manhattan	Brooklyn	Staten Island
<i>Number of Districts</i>				
Low	3,304	784	1,666	854
High	235	115	79	41
Total	3,539	899	1,745	895
<i>Number of Districts Surveyed</i>				
Low	272	86	100	86
High	235	115	79	41
Total	507	201	179	127
<i>Portion of Districts Actually Surveyed</i>				
Percent of "Low" Districts Surveyed	8.2%	11.0%	6.0%	10.1%
Percent of All Districts Surveyed	14.3%	22.4%	10.3%	14.2%
<i>Source: New York City Department of Homeless Services, "Homeless Outreach Population Estimate 2004" (April 15, 2004)</i>				

⁵ According to the press release issued by DHS in advance of the 2004 survey, “Teams of volunteers will be stationed at Brooklyn and Manhattan terminal stations for the A, B, D, E, F, L, M, N, Q, R, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 9 lines, where trains stop and car doors open for 20 minute intervals. Teams will make passes through the stopped trains to identify individuals without homes. Each train will be canvassed one time during the four-hour survey.” New York City Department of Homeless Services, “New York City’s Second Annual Homeless Outreach Population Estimate – HOPE 2004 – Targets Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Staten Island” (February 23, 2004).

Thus, although only a small fraction of the total area of each borough and of subway stations was actually surveyed, DHS utilized statistical extrapolation to produce an estimate of the street homeless population in those areas. As shown in Table 2, which shows the published estimates, DHS claims that the number of people sleeping on Manhattan streets actually declined by 5 percent between February 2003 and February 2004, from 1,560 to 1,482 individuals. Comparisons for Manhattan subway stations are impossible because DHS has not released the raw data collected from the surveys.

	Manhattan	Brooklyn	Staten Island	Subway Stations*	Subway Cars and Terminal Stations	Total for Three Boroughs and Subways
February 24, 2003	1,560			220		1,780
February 25, 2004	1,482	414	216	314	268	2,694
Percent Change 2003-2004	-5.0%					
*For 2003, this reflects a sampling of all Manhattan subway stations. For 2004, this reflects a sampling of non-terminal subways stations.						
Source: New York City Department of Homeless Services, "Homeless Outreach Population Survey Results" (March 27, 2003), and "Homeless Outreach Population Estimate 2004" (April 15, 2004)						

B. Outreach, Shelter, and Emergency Food Assistance Data that Contradict the DHS Claims

While the Department of Homeless Services surveys claim that street homelessness in Manhattan declined by 5 percent over the past year, data from outreach teams, shelters, and emergency food programs show the opposite. Indeed, these sources overwhelmingly report a significant increase in street homelessness over the past year, calling into question the results of the DHS street survey.

1. Data from City-funded outreach teams: The Department of Homeless Services contracts with several not-for-profit service providers to conduct street outreach services; DHS also directly operates a small outreach team. The outreach teams are required to report the number of contacts they make with street homeless individuals. Although the contact data is unduplicated – meaning that it may include multiple contacts with the same individual – it can be used to assess trends in street homelessness.

The most recently available data, from the months leading up to the February 2003 and 2004 street surveys, clearly points to a rise in street homelessness.⁶ As shown in Chart 1, each month leading up to the survey showed at least a 5 percent increase in the number of homeless individuals contacted by outreach teams, with an average 6.9 percent increase for the months September to December. Thus, reports made by DHS's own contractors and its outreach team clearly documented a rise in the number of homeless individuals found on the streets of New York City from late 2002 through late 2003, a period roughly concurrent with the street surveys.

⁶ New York City Department of Homeless Services, "Critical Activities Reports" (FY 2003 and FY 2004, year to date), available at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/car.html>. Note: As this report was prepared, the most recent outreach data available on the DHS website for FY 2004 was December 2003.

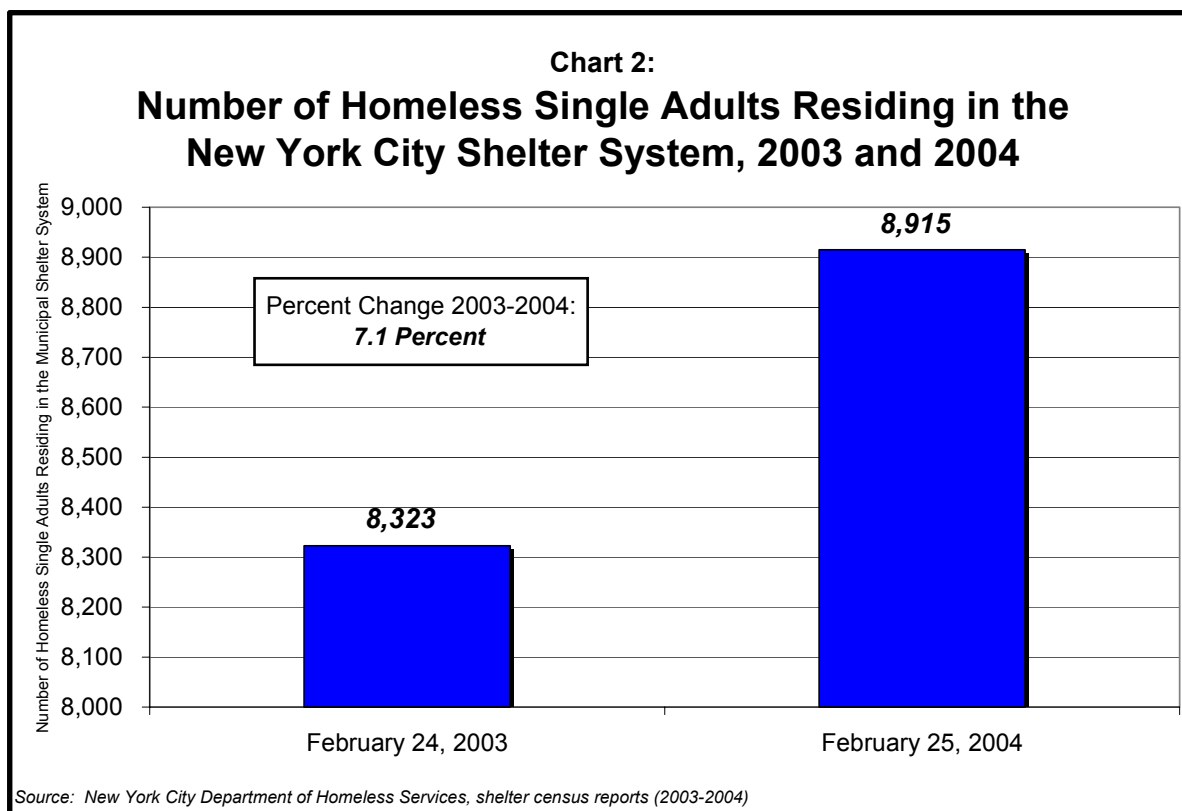


2. Reports from emergency food programs: Soup kitchens and emergency food programs also reported significant increases in the number of homeless people they served over the past year. A comprehensive survey of emergency food providers citywide, prepared by the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, found that 66.8 percent of emergency food programs reported an increase in the number of homeless people seeking their help, with 35.3 percent reporting that the number of homeless people seeking food aid "greatly increased." In contrast, only 4.8 percent of the programs surveyed reported that the number of homeless people seeking help had decreased. The New York City Coalition Against Hunger report, which was issued in November 2003, received responses from 187 emergency food programs citywide, and its findings confirmed reports from some of the largest soup kitchens in Manhattan.

3. Population of homeless single adults in shelters: During the roughly 25 years of modern homelessness in New York City, the number of homeless single adults in shelters has always strongly correlated with the street homeless population. Thus, as the single-adult shelter population rises, so does the street homeless population, and vice versa. This correlation was demonstrated most notably in the early 1990s when, in the wake of investments in supportive housing for homeless individuals living with mental illness, both the shelter and street homeless populations declined dramatically. One would therefore expect changes in the single-adult shelter population to be reflected on the streets.

Comparing the nights of the two DHS surveys – February 24, 2003, and February 25, 2004 – the single-adult shelter population increased from 8,323 to 8,915 homeless single adults, a 7.1 percent

increase (see Chart 2).⁷ Thus, the increase in the adult shelter population confirms the trends found in the outreach and emergency food program data which documented an increase in street homelessness. Nevertheless, the DHS survey – contradicting more than two decades of findings and experience around the issue of homelessness – claims that the street population actually declined despite the 7 percent increase in the adult homeless shelter population.



C. Methodological Flaws in the DHS Survey

As will be noted below, the DHS surveys were plagued by many of the same methodological and administrative flaws as previous efforts in New York City and elsewhere. Following is a summary of the major problems with the DHS that resulted in a substantial undercount. However, it is important to note that, to date, DHS has refused to release the raw data compiled from the 2003 and 2004 surveys, including the number of people actually enumerated in various locations, a list of which districts and subway stations were assigned into the “high” to “low” classifications, or an account of which districts and subway stations were surveyed and which were not.⁸ Therefore, a comprehensive assessment of the success or failure of the DHS effort is impossible given the agency’s refusal to provide the actual data collected from the surveys.

1. Faulty methodological assumptions: One of the major problems with the DHS survey (as with the Chicago study described in part two) was the use of the “high,” “medium,” and “low” classifications

⁷ New York City Department of Homeless Services, shelter census reports. Note that this trend is reflected in the average daily census for the two months in question – the average daily population of homeless single adults rose from 8,234 individuals in February 2003 to 8,862 individuals in February 2004, a 7.6 percent increase.

⁸ “It was impossible, however, to determine where the city’s heaviest concentrations of homelessness were because the agency yesterday refused to provide any raw data on specific locations.” Saltonstall, David, “1 in 4 Homeless on Streets,” *New York Daily News* (March 28, 2003), available at <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/local/v-pfriendly/story/70668p-65717c.html>.

and the information used to develop those assumptions. From the outset, it was clear that the assessments of the NYPD, outreach providers, and the MTA would be imperfect; moreover, those agencies are likely to have institutional biases which may lead them to underreport the incidence of street homelessness in the areas they patrol. In any case, the published results of both the 2003 and surveys confirm that the classifications were faulty. In particular, the 2003 report notes that an average of 1.6 individuals were found in the 70 “low” Manhattan districts surveyed, significantly higher than the “one or none” assumption of the number of people residing in those districts. And the 2004 report notes that an average of 2.4 individuals were found in the “high” Staten Island districts, significantly higher than projected.⁹

2. Under-sampling of so-called “low” districts: In addition, it is clear that the “low” districts were significantly under-sampled in both surveys. Again, only 10 percent of the 706 “low” Manhattan districts were surveyed in 2003, meaning that there is no concrete information about the 636 so-called “low” districts which were not visited by volunteers.¹⁰ And only 8.2 percent of “low” districts were sampled in the three boroughs covered by the 2004 survey. If the assumptions used to classify some districts as “low” were faulty – as the results noted above would indicate – then it would call into question the statistical estimate DHS ultimately produced.
3. Questionable statistical extrapolation and failure to report an error range: Because the figures reported by DHS for the surveys are statistical estimates, it is reasonable to question their accuracy. Indeed, even public opinion polls, which benefit from much more sophisticated information than that available to DHS survey designers, report an error range and are routinely off the mark. However, DHS did not report an error range (i.e., a standard deviation) to allow the general public or researchers to assess the reliability of the estimate. (Peter Rossi, in his 1986 Chicago study, reported an error range with his estimate.¹¹) Finally, by refusing to release the raw data, DHS has prevented researchers from assessing the reliability of statistical methodology used to arrive at the figures from the surveys. Indeed, in 2004 the DHS survey volunteers actually enumerated more people (474) sleeping outdoors in Manhattan than in 2003 (427 people enumerated), but without allowing independent researchers to view the raw data or the calculations used to derive the statistical estimates published by DHS, the reliability of the estimates cannot be known.¹²
4. Incomplete coverage: As was widely noted, the 2003 survey failed to include significant areas of Manhattan where street homeless people are known to congregate, including subway trains, abandoned buildings and vehicles, tunnels, and other semi-enclosed places. In practice, many survey volunteers also tended to avoid areas under bridges and roadways. The failure to include these areas was exacerbated by the unusually cold temperatures on February 25, 2003 – in such conditions, many street homeless individuals are much more likely to seek cover in subway trains or tunnels, or to find temporary indoor accommodations in transportation terminals, open-all-night restaurants, or other buildings.

⁹ The DHS report does not provide information on the range of variation found within the districts surveyed. Thus, without the raw data, it is difficult to determine with any more precision how flawed the assumptions were.

¹⁰ Once again, because DHS has refused to release the raw data from the survey – including the classification of the various districts – it is difficult for researchers to assess the accuracy of its assumptions.

¹¹ Rossi (1987), Table 5, p. 7. As noted above, combining the street and shelter survey estimates, Rossi’s report estimated a total homeless population of 2,020 people, with an error range of plus or minus 275.

¹² Enumeration data found in New York City Department of Homeless Services, “Homeless Outreach Population Estimate (HOPE) 2004” (April 15, 2004). Note that the report does not include information about the locations (i.e., whether in “high,” “medium,” or “low” districts) where these individuals were enumerated.

Many of the same concerns arose for the 2004 survey. Indeed, many outreach providers note that, in Staten Island and Brooklyn in particular, homeless people are very likely to seek out makeshift shelter in abandoned buildings or vehicles on cold nights. In addition, the survey's inclusion of subway cars only at the terminal stations was likely to miss homeless individuals who do not ride trains to the final stop.

5. Failure to include independent observers: DHS staff refused several requests to include independent observers, such as those used during the Census Bureau's 1990 effort (see next section).¹³ Having observers stationed in areas targeted by the survey would have permitted an independent assessment of the performance of the volunteers and the permitted DHS and researchers to measure how comprehensive the coverage was.
6. Inconsistent performance of volunteers: There is no doubt that the presence of hundreds of volunteers during the DHS street surveys is evidence of the compassion and concern many New Yorkers have for their homeless neighbors. However, as academic researchers found in 1990 (see discussion below), large-scale surveys and "counts" invariably depend on the varying quality of the enumerators or volunteers, however well-intentioned they may be. In practice, many volunteers tend to ignore or modify survey procedures, especially towards the end of a long, cold night on the streets. According to press accounts, on the night of the 2003 DHS survey several teams did not actually canvass their districts for the entire four hours, and several did not question every person encountered.¹⁴ Similar reports were made for the 2004 survey. In addition, in places like transportation terminals where homeless individuals often attempt to "blend in" to avoid the attention of the police and the authorities, it is especially difficult for non-practiced volunteers to identify homeless people. Again, the inclusion of independent observers would have allowed City officials and researchers to assess how well the survey was administered in the sample areas. Finally, it should be emphasized that, even in their assigned sample districts, the survey volunteers could not be everywhere at once, raising the possibility that some homeless people who were moving at the time of the count, or who arrived later from adjacent areas, may have been missed.

C. Additional Reasons to Question the DHS Survey Results

In addition to methodological concerns, there are other compelling reasons to doubt the results of the DHS surveys. The following section offers comparisons between the DHS estimates and other public data. It should be emphasized that, while the comparisons are not strictly consistent – for instance, one cannot match reports from outreach teams with the DHS estimates or Census Bureau enumerations – the comparisons do offer helpful insights into the dimensions of street homelessness in New York City and the plausibility of the City's claims.

1. Comparison with Census Bureau data: Comparison with the 1990 Census Bureau count and contemporary shelter census data raises serious questions about the reliability of the DHS survey. As noted in part two of this paper, the Census Bureau's 1990 count enumerated 6,102 people "visible in street locations" in Manhattan, a figure that was criticized by academic observers as a substantial undercount. As shown in Table 3, this would indicate at least a 70.8 percent decline in Manhattan's street homeless population between March 1990 and February 2003, if one accepts the DHS results from the 2003 survey as an accurate estimate. In comparison, the shelter population of

¹³ Coalition for the Homeless made this recommendation, and several others, at an October 22, 2002, meeting with DHS policy staff, and in subsequent conversations. Other organizations (including Partnership for the Homeless) and researchers also recommended utilizing independent observers.

¹⁴ Kilgannon, Corey, "No Door-to-Door in This Census; Volunteers Outnumber Subjects in Homeless Count," *New York Times* (February 26, 2003), p. B1.

homeless single adults declined only 9.6 percent over the same period.¹⁵ Put another way, the ratio of sheltered to unsheltered homeless adults, which was 1.5 to one in 1990 (using the Census Bureau figure) would have changed dramatically to 4.7 to one in February 2003 if the DHS 2003 survey estimate were considered accurate. (As noted below, the 1986 Rossi study in Chicago also estimated a substantially smaller street homeless population [528 people] than the “S-Night” count [1,584 people] just four years later.)

Table 3
COMPARISON OF CHANGES IN SHELTERED AND UNSHELTERED HOMELESS POPULATIONS IN NEW YORK CITY, 1990 AND 2003

	Population of Homeless Single Adults in the Municipal Shelter System*	Number of Homeless People Counted/Estimated Outdoors in Manhattan**	Ratio of Sheltered to Unsheltered Homeless People
March 1990	9,209	6,102	1.5
February 25, 2003	8,323	1,780	4.7
Percent Change	-9.6%	-70.8%	

*Data from Human Resources Administration and Department of Homeless Services, shelter census reports
 Data from March 1990 represents average daily census of homeless single adults in shelters.
 **Data for 1990 from the U.S. Bureau of the Census "S-Night" count, for 2003 from Department of Homeless Services street survey

Sources: *United States Bureau of the Census, 1990 Census of Population and Housing; New York City Human Resources Administration and Department of Homeless Services, shelter census reports (1990 and 2003) New York City Department of Homeless Services, "Homeless Outreach Population Survey" (report, March 27, 2003)*

2. Comparison with outreach data: Data reported by homeless outreach providers contracted by the City also raises serious questions about the reliability of the DHS survey results. For more than a decade DHS has contracted with not-for-profit agencies to provide mobile outreach in each of the boroughs; in addition, DHS operates its own outreach unit, and, as noted above, citywide mobile outreach services are provided under contract by the Bowery Residents Committee. These outreach providers are required to report regularly on contacts with street homeless individuals (as well as other services provided), as shown in Table 4.¹⁶ It must be noted that this outreach data is not unduplicated, meaning it may report multiple contacts with the same individual. Nevertheless, as noted above, it offers important insight into the dimensions of the street homeless population.

In February 2003, the same month that DHS conducted its first survey, the DHS-contracted outreach teams reported making 6,733 contacts citywide. As shown in Table 2, for the City fiscal year (CFY) 2003, outreach providers reported making 107,951 contacts with street homeless individuals citywide.¹⁷ In comparison, in CFY 1990 the number of contacts reported was 111,003 people.¹⁸

¹⁵ New York City Human Resources Administration and Department of Homeless Services, shelter census reports. Daily shelter census data for March 1990 is unavailable; the figure of 9,209 people reflects the average daily census of homeless single adults in the municipal shelter system for that month.

¹⁶ In addition to the DHS-contracted outreach providers, several other not-for-profit agencies provide outreach services – often in neighborhoods or smaller “catchment areas” – which are funded by other Federal, State, and City agencies, or by business improvement districts (BIDs).

¹⁷ New York City Department of Homeless Services, outreach reports, available at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/report.html>. Note that this data records outreach contacts in the five boroughs.

¹⁸ New York City Human Resources Administration, outreach reports (FY 1990). Note that this data records outreach contacts in the five boroughs.

Thus, between CFY 1990 and CFY 2003 there was a 2.7 percent decrease in the number of contacts, compared with the 70.8 percent decrease from the March 1990 Census Bureau count and the February 2003 DHS survey results (see again Table 4). Once again, alternative City data reflecting the dimensions of street homelessness call into question the accuracy of the DHS survey results.

Table 4 COMPARISON OF DATA ON OUTREACH CONTACTS WITH STREET HOMELESS PEOPLE IN NEW YORK CITY, CFY 1990 AND CFY 2003		
	Total Annual Contacts with Street Homeless Individuals Reported by City-Contracted Outreach Teams	Number of Homeless People Counted/Estimated Outdoors in Manhattan**
CFY 1990	111,003	6,102
CFY 2003	107,951	1,780
Percent Change	-2.7%	-70.8%
*Data for point-in-time counts for Manhattan from 1990 Census "S-Night" count (March 20-21), and from 2003 Department of Homeless Services street survey (February 25)		
Source: New York City Human Resources Administration and Department of Homeless Services, outreach reports (CFY 1990 and CFY 2003); United States Bureau of the Census, 1990 Census of Population and Housing; Department of Homeless Services, "Homeless Outreach Population Survey" (report, March 27, 2003)		

3. Conflicting reports from emergency food providers: Reports from emergency food programs – where many homeless people reported that they had not been counted on the night of the DHS survey – also cast doubt on the survey’s results. In February 2003 street homeless clients of Coalition for the Homeless’ Grand Central Food Program, a mobile soup kitchen which distributes hundreds of meals nightly at more than two dozen locations in Manhattan, overwhelmingly reported that they had not witnessed any DHS volunteers on the night of the count. According to Fraser Bresnahan, director of the program, some 225 street homeless individuals were given meals on the night of February 24th. The Grand Central Food Program’s staff and volunteers interviewed its clients on subsequent nights to determine how many had been counted by DHS volunteers, and more than 90 percent of those interviewed reported that they had not been counted. This included dozens of homeless people who slept outdoors in the Midtown area of Manhattan, or in Penn Station and the South Ferry Terminal, areas with large concentrations of street homelessness.

In addition, the majority of street homeless people visiting the Church of the Holy Apostle’s soup kitchen – which feeds more than one thousand people per day in the Chelsea neighborhood on Manhattan’s West Side – also reported that they had not been contacted by survey volunteers during the 2003 survey. Again, because the City has refused to release data about which districts of the Manhattan were sampled and which were not, it is difficult to be certain of the reason many homeless people reported that they’d been missed by the count, but these reports raise questions about the thoroughness of the survey efforts in some areas with high concentrations of street homelessness.

4. Characteristics of the street homeless population: More than two decades of research and experience have shown that many characteristics of the street homeless population present significant obstacles

to accomplishing an accurate point-in-time “count” or “census.”¹⁹ More than anything, the population is mobile and seasonal, and, for reasons of survival, is practiced in hiding from local authorities. If anything, the latter characteristic has been enhanced in recent years with the aggressive “quality-of-life” enforcement initiatives undertaken by the NYPD under the Giuliani and Bloomberg Administrations. (Indeed, as recently as November 2002 the news media reported a rapid rise in the number of arrests of street homeless people by the police department, the result of a new directive to police officers to enforce “quality-of-life” violations.²⁰) In contrast to 1990, for instance, when so-called “encampments” or sizable groups of street homeless people were relatively commonplace, homeless individuals now tend to remain more isolated and hidden. (Indeed, even the DHS survey report notes that street homelessness appears more “dispersed throughout the borough, not concentrated in a few key areas.”²¹) As discussed below, this is another reason that “point-in-time” counts or estimates are much less useful to researchers and policymakers than measurements of prevalence over time.

Part Two:

An Old Game: Two Decades of Flawed “Counts” of the Street Homeless

Far from being (as the City claimed in a 2003 press release) the “first official effort to gauge [the] size of the street homeless population,”²² the DHS surveys are merely the latest in a series of “counts” and estimations of the street homeless population by government agencies and researchers. These attempts to “count” the street homeless date back more than two decades to the early days of modern homelessness.²³ Martha Burt, a research director at the Urban Institute and a nationally recognized expert on homelessness, authored an overview of two dozen studies published between 1983 and 1991 which attempted to account for the size of homeless populations nationwide or in localities. She concluded:

We do quite well at counting and describing people in shelters, assuming we have some agreement on what types of facilities should be included as shelters. We do reasonably well at counting and describing people who use other services, after adopting some criteria for who should be included as homeless. We do far less well at including people who are not in shelters or using other services for homeless people – those who are on the streets are missed because they do not want to be found or because finding them might be dangerous, and others, including the rural homeless and the “doubled up,” are often not included because we cannot agree on definitions.”²⁴

Burt and other experts note that, while many studies attempt to arrive at “point-in-time” or one-day counts of homeless people (like the DHS survey), the much more useful data for policymakers and researchers is *prevalence data* – that is, data that looks at the number of different individuals who experience homelessness over a period of time. The use of computer databases and other management

¹⁹ Many of these issues are summarized in Hopper (1992).

²⁰ Baker, Al, “Police Efforts Lead to Arrests of Homeless,” *New York Times* (November 14, 2002), p. B1.

²¹ New York City Department of Homeless Services, “Homeless Outreach Population Survey Results” (March 27, 2003).

²² New York City Department of Homeless Services, “NYC, 1000 Volunteers Strong, Takes to Streets in First Official Effort to Gauge Size of Street Homeless Population” (news release, February 24, 2003), available at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/pdf/pr040203.pdf>.

²³ Indeed, as researcher Kim Hopper has noted, “The Census Bureau’s interest in the numbers and demographics of homeless, and in the institutions catering to them, dates at least from the time of a special enumeration of Minneapolis’ skid row in the mid-1950s.” Hopper, Kim, “Counting the New York Homeless: An Ethnographic Perspective,” in *New England Journal of Public Policy* (Volume 8, Number 1, pp. 771-791, 1992), p. 771.

²⁴ Burt, Martha, “Homelessness: Definitions and Counts,” in Baumohl, Jim, editor, *Homelessness in America* (Oryx Press, 1996; pp. 15-23), p. 16.

information systems (MIS) over the past decade have dramatically improved information about homeless populations, and have reinforced the weakness of “point-in-time” counts. (See also the recommendations at the conclusion of this paper.)

Two large-scale efforts serve as precursors for the recent DHS surveys. Both attempted to arrive at point-in-time “counts” or estimates of the street homeless population, and both were widely criticized at the time as significant undercounts.

A. The 1986 Chicago Study

One effort undertaken in the 1980s was a 1986 survey of the street homeless population in Chicago, coordinated by researcher Peter Rossi.²⁵ As noted in part one above, the Chicago study utilized a stratified sampling methodology in which the 19,409 blocks in Chicago were classified as having “high,” “medium,” or “low” densities of homelessness. These classifications were made, according to Rossi, by “obtaining expert guesses” from the Chicago Police Department. The Rossi study surveyed only 245 blocks in Chicago from February 22 to March 7, 1986. Using statistical extrapolation, Rossi estimated that the street homeless population in Chicago was only 528 people.²⁶ The results of the Rossi study were strongly criticized by local service providers and advocates, particularly by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless.²⁷

Indeed, the Rossi effort was again called into question just a few years later when the United States Census Bureau enumerated 1,584 people “visible in street locations” in Chicago in March 1990, a figure which was also criticized as an undercount.²⁸ Thus, if one accepts the Rossi estimate as reliable, then it is necessary to claim that Chicago’s street homeless population grew by at least 200 percent over only a four-year period.²⁹

B. The 1990 “S-Night” Count in New York City

The largest national effort undertaken to date to enumerate the street homeless population was the Census Bureau’s “S-Night” count in 1990. After conducting pilot studies in several cities in the years before the decennial census, the Census Bureau attempted to count people “visible in street locations” by sending teams of enumerators to outdoor locations on March 20-21, 1990. The results of the “S-Night” effort were widely challenged by academics, homeless service providers, advocates, and other observers. As Kim Hopper, a researcher who studied the New York City effort, wrote, “Critics have complained of inadequate coverage of homeless ‘congregating sites,’ the erratic performance of street enumerators, and the sometimes surreal presence of the media monitoring the event.”³⁰

²⁵ Rossi, Peter H., “Estimating the Number of Homeless in Chicago,” (paper presented at the conference of the Survey Research Methods Section, American Statistical Association, 1987) available at <http://www.amstat.org/sections/SRMS/proceedings/y1987.html>.

²⁶ Rossi (1987), Table 5, p. 7. The Rossi study also surveyed homeless shelters, utilizing a similar stratified sampling technique, and arrived at an estimate of 1,492 people for the shelter population. Combining the street and shelter survey estimates, the report estimated a total homeless population of 2,020 people, with an error range of plus or minus 275.

²⁷ Interview with Les Brown, Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (February 20, 2003). One of the concerns raised by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless was the presence of uniformed police officers in the survey teams.

²⁸ United States Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population and Housing*, available at <http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen1990.html>. The Census Bureau also enumerated 5,180 people sleeping in homeless shelters.

²⁹ Comparing the two figures for Chicago’s shelter population – Rossi’s 1986 estimate of 1,492 people, and the Census Bureau’s enumeration of 5,180 people – also demonstrates a wide disparity, suggesting a 274 percent increase over four years if one accepts the survey figure as accurate.

³⁰ Hopper, Kim, *Reckoning with Homelessness* (Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 135. Note that the presence of the news media during the City’s highly publicized recent survey was also viewed by some as a distraction.

In New York City, the Census Bureau reported that it enumerated 10,447 people “visible in street locations” in the five boroughs, with 6,102 people counted in Manhattan.³¹ However, an independent study of the Census Bureau’s performance during the “S-Night” count, conducted by a team of academic researchers coordinated by Hopper, documented a substantial undercount. Hopper’s team deployed 127 independent observers to monitor the count to a quasi-random sample of 41 sites designated by the Census Bureau. The observers noted significant problems with the performance of enumerators. In a published account of the study, Hopper summarized these problems as follows:

A full count was hampered by the difficulty of counting sleeping people wrapped in blankets and tarps and otherwise hidden from view by plastic bags, boxes, postal carts, and homemade shanty structures; by the incomplete listing (required in advance of the count) of many of the sites where homeless people congregate; by faulty coverage at the sites that were visited by Bureau enumerators; by the apparent failure of enumerators to visit many of the smaller sites that had been identified; and by the evident reluctance of some enumerators to follow Census Bureau procedures.³²

All in all, Hopper’s team estimated that only between 55 and 57 percent of the street homeless population in Manhattan was actually enumerated by the Census Bureau. Moreover, there was a strong likelihood that there were homeless people in locations *not* identified beforehand by the Census Bureau who were not enumerated. As Hopper concluded, “Thus the S-Night operation netted just over half of those ‘selected components of the homeless population’ *visibly* present in the predesignated sites at the time.”³³

Part Three:

Potential Impact of the Undercount on Funding and Services for the Homeless

The DHS survey was undertaken in part to satisfy new Federal statutory reporting requirements for cities that receive homeless services funding. Beginning in October 2004, states and localities that receive funding for homeless services from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), often referred to as “Continuum of Care” funds, should, according to the U.S. House of Representatives report on the legislation, “be collecting an array of data on homelessness in order to prevent duplicate counting of homeless persons, and to analyze their patterns of use of assistance, including how they enter and exit the homeless assistance system and the effectiveness of the system.”³⁴

Clearly, the enormous size of New York City’s documented homeless shelter population – which included more than 38,000 men, women, and children residing nightly in the municipal shelter system in March 2004 – would permit the City to receive significant funding under the existing Federal funding formulas. However, by utilizing the DHS survey results as the City government’s official estimation of the unsheltered homeless population, or similar undercounts in future years, the City threatens to reduce desperately needed funding for this vulnerable population.

³¹ United States Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population and Housing*, available at <http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen1990.html>.

³² Hopper, Kim, “Counting the Homeless: S-Night in New York,” in *Evaluation Review* (Volume 16, Number 4, August 1992, pp. 376-388), pp. 376-377.

³³ Hopper (1992), pp. 379-380.

³⁴ Center for Social Policy, John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs, University of Massachusetts Boston, “Homeless Management Information Systems: Implementation Guide” (September 2002), available at <http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/hmis/implementation/index.cfm>.

In addition, by widely publicizing the results of the survey,³⁵ the City threatens to diminish the support of elected officials and the general public for housing and services for the street homeless population. While the City has agreed in a 1981 consent decree to provide emergency shelter for homeless men and women – a legal protection that has prevented the closing of shelters in a fiscally-constrained time that has witnessed the threatened closing of child care services, senior centers, and firehouses – there is no similar legal mandate for outreach services and drop-in centers.³⁶ Indeed, Mayor Bloomberg’s so-called “contingency” budget plan for CFY 2004 included a proposal to eliminate all City funding for drop-in centers and outreach services for street homeless individuals. Thus, if elected officials and the general public are misled by the DHS survey’s results to believe that the street homeless population is much smaller than it actually is, these vital services could be threatened with funding reductions.

Part Four: Better Ways to Measure the Homeless Population

As researcher Martha Burt has noted, “Estimates of the number of people homeless are always political footballs.”³⁷ However, improvements in technology, particularly computer databases, and a decade of groundbreaking academic research have taught us much better ways to measure homeless populations. These improved methodologies, which are already in place for the majority of the sheltered homeless population, would also satisfy Federal requirements that seek unduplicated counts of homeless populations.

As noted above, the undercount produced by the DHS survey is largely the result of flawed methodology and implementation. However, it also reflects an outdated and increasingly discredited approach to measuring the homeless population. There is an emerging consensus among researchers that “point-in-time” counts or estimations of the homeless population are much less reliable and useful than prevalence counts – i.e., assessments of how many different individuals experience homelessness over a period of time.³⁸ Since the groundbreaking research of University of Pennsylvania researcher Dennis Culhane and others in the 1990s, it is well known that there is enormous turnover in the homeless population – both sheltered and unsheltered – and that a “point-in-time” snapshot of the population severely distorts the true dimensions of the problem. Culhane’s research, for instance, revealed that over a five-year period (1988-1992) some 239,000 different adults and children utilized the New York City shelter system, although the average daily census was only 23,000 people.³⁹ In CFY 2003, according to City data, 94,130 different adults and children utilized the New York City shelter

³⁵ In both 2003 and 2004, the Department of Homeless Services’ press office transformed the survey into a major local news media event, inviting reporters to accompany volunteers and staging a press conference before the survey was conducted. When the 2003 report was released, the DHS press office also publicized the results by organizing a press conference at which the DHS commissioner defended the accuracy of the results. Other cities have chosen to avoid the pitfalls of making a press event out of their efforts to fulfill Federal requirements to measure the homeless population.

³⁶ Even the protections guaranteed by the 1981 consent order in *Callahan v. Carey* are under threat. The Bloomberg Administration pursued an appeal of a February 2000 State court ruling in *Callahan* blocking the denial of shelter to homeless individuals due to non-compliance with social service plans and administrative rules.

³⁷ Burt, Martha *et al*, *Helping America’s Homeless: Emergency Shelter or Affordable Housing* (The Urban Institute, 2001), p. 24.

³⁸ Culhane, Dennis P. *et al*, “The Prevalence of Homelessness in 1998: Results from the Analysis of Administrative Data in Nine US Jurisdictions” (Center for Mental Health Policy and Services Research, University of Pennsylvania, May 2000), available at <http://www.uphs.upenn.edu/cmhpsr/directory/prev98.pdf>.

³⁹ Culhane, Dennis P. *et al*, “Public Shelter Admission Rates in Philadelphia and New York City: The Implications of Turnover for Sheltered Population Counts,” *Housing Policy Debate* (Volume 2, Issue 2, pp. 107-140, 1994), available at http://www.fanniemaefoundation.org/programs/hpd/pdf/hpd_0502_culhane.pdf.

system, although the average daily census during that period was 37,606 people.⁴⁰ Thus, “point-in-time” counts tend to mask substantially higher rates of homelessness.

In the street homeless context, this problem is compounded by the difficulty of accurately locating much of the population. However, there are better ways to measure the dimensions of the street homeless population by assessing the prevalence of street homelessness. One method, which provided the basis for the research of Culhane and others, is the use of management information systems (MIS) data on homeless services. MIS – which has been used in the New York City shelter system since the 1980s to collect *unduplicated* data – allows City officials and researchers to accurately count the number of different individuals who utilize services over a period of time. Currently, however, DHS-funded outreach providers and drop-in centers – two services that exclusively assist street homeless individuals – do not utilize MIS and do not collect unduplicated data on the people they serve. Thus, as noted above, outreach providers report on the number of contacts they make with street homeless people, not the number of different individuals assisted.

DHS should therefore expand the use of MIS to drop-in centers and outreach providers (including, where possible, those not directly funded by DHS). This would allow the City and independent researchers to assess more accurately the number of different individuals assisted by various programs for homeless New Yorkers, and the number of homeless people still un-served by the municipal shelter system.

Finally, City officials should be more forthcoming when they report the results of street surveys. In other localities, mayors and homeless services officials have forthrightly and accurately emphasized that results of street surveys are estimates, or have noted that many homeless individuals are bound to be missed during efforts to count them. Indeed, one Philadelphia official recently stated that his city’s attempt to count the street homeless population invariably missed people, but that the exercise was useful for understanding trends, a very reasonable position. In contrast, Bloomberg Administration officials have chosen stubbornly to defend the accuracy of their statistical estimate, without acknowledging even the potential for error or undercounts.

As a first step towards addressing these problems, Bloomberg Administration officials should immediately release the raw data from the 2003 and 2004 surveys so that independent researchers can assess the reliability of the City’s statistical estimate.

Part Five: Genuine Long-Term Solutions Instead of Undercounts

When it released its 2003 survey results, DHS also included a section entitled “Resulting Action Plan.”⁴¹ However, what was included in this “action plan” was disheartening. The four items listed under this heading fail to provide a single unit of permanent, supportive housing for street homeless individuals, and even fail to provide for enhanced access to shelter. The March 2003 “action plan” included the following:

⁴⁰ New York City Department of Homeless Services, shelter census reports, available at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/report.html>.

⁴¹ New York City Department of Homeless Services, “Homeless Outreach Population Survey 2003: Key Findings, Action Plan, Survey Next Steps” (March 27, 2003).

- An initiative previously announced by Common Ground Community, a not-for-profit agency, which had obtained funding to develop a pilot project to assist the “chronically” street homeless;
- A pledge to adjust the routes of outreach teams, which already occurs on a periodic basis;
- A proposal to expand capacity at drop-in centers, which provide chairs in which street homeless individuals must sleep upright; and
- A pledge to reduce discharges from correctional facilities to shelters or the streets, which is essentially the result of a January 8, 2003, settlement of the *Brad H. v. City of New York* lawsuit, which was brought on behalf of mentally-ill inmates of City jails who had been discharged directly to the streets without appropriate treatment, housing, and services.⁴²

Thus, the “action plan” merely recites initiatives that were already in the works, as well as a pledge to provide additional capacity at drop-in centers – that is, more chairs for vulnerable individuals to sleep in while sitting upright. Therefore, while the DHS press office’s March 27, 2003, press release describes “new initiatives and strategies aimed at reducing street homelessness,”⁴³ the “action plan” is neither “new” nor designed to significantly reduce the number of people sleeping on New York City streets.

There is no secret about the most effective way to reduce street homelessness. The experience of the early 1990s in New York City and a wealth of academic research have proven that supportive housing – i.e., permanent housing with on-site services for people living with mental illness and other disabilities – successfully reduces the number of homeless single adults. Indeed, from 1988 to 1994 the New York City shelter population of homeless individuals declined by 37 percent, from 9,675 to 6,106 people per night.⁴⁴ During this period, the street homeless population also declined dramatically. These results are not surprising, given that studies have shown that as many as three-quarters of street homeless individuals have mental illness and require the mix of housing and services provided by supportive housing.

What was the impetus for the dramatic decline in homelessness a decade ago? The primary cause was an ambitious initiative by the City and State to create supportive housing for homeless individuals. The centerpiece of this effort was the 1990 “New York/New York Agreement,” a City-State collaboration which produced 3,814 units of supportive housing for homeless adults living with mental illness. A landmark study by University of Pennsylvania researchers showed that New York/New York housing not only was enormously successful in reducing episodes of homelessness among the people it assisted, but also reduced public expenditures on shelter, hospital care, and other services.⁴⁵ All in all, according to the study, the total cost to taxpayers of housing a mentally-ill individual in a New York/New York apartment was virtually the same as the cost of leaving that individual homeless.

Unfortunately, in recent years the State and City have sharply reduced funding for supportive housing, and vacancy rates in existing supportive housing units currently stand at an emergency-level 1.8 percent.⁴⁶ Indeed, in 1998 the New York City Department of Mental Health described a need for 10,000 units of supportive housing over five years to address the housing needs of homeless adults living with

⁴² The settlement was widely covered in the news media when it was reached. For example, see Saulny, Susan, “City Agrees to Help Care for Mentally Ill Inmates After Release,” *New York Times* (January 9, 2003), Page B4.

⁴³ New York City Department of Homeless Services, “First-of-Its-Kind Data Provides Foundation for New Action Plan to Reduce Street Homelessness” (news release, March 27, 2003), available at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/pdf/pr040203.pdf>.

⁴⁴ New York City Human Resources Administration and Department of Homeless Services, shelter census reports.

⁴⁵ Culhane, Dennis P. *et al.*, “Public Service Reductions Associated with Placement of Homeless Persons with Severe Mental Illness in Supportive Housing,” *Housing Policy Debate* (Volume 12, Issue 1, pp. 107-163, 2002), available at http://www.fanniemaefoundation.org/programs/hpd/pdf/hpd_1301_culhane.pdf.

⁴⁶ Center for Urban Community Services, Residential Placement Management Services, supportive housing vacancy report (2004).

mental illness. Nevertheless, Governor Pataki and former-Mayor Giuliani responded with a “New York/New York II Agreement” that pledged only 1,500 units of supportive housing over five years, and those units are already nearing capacity.⁴⁷

The consequence of State and City inaction has been predictable: The adult shelter population has risen significantly, exceeding 9,000 people per night during many nights this past winter for the first time since 1990, when the first “New York/New York Agreement” was signed. Emergency food programs and outreach teams have reported that they are assisting rising numbers of street homeless individuals, in particular adults living with mental illness. For this reason, the “Campaign for a New York/New York III Agreement” – a coalition of supportive housing providers, mental health organizations, and advocates – has called on the City and State to renew the “New York/New York Agreement” to produce 9,000 units of supportive housing over five years, with 7,500 units targeted to homeless individuals living with mental illness and the remaining 1,500 to homeless families with special needs.⁴⁸

There is no mystery about how to reduce street homelessness. Sufficient investments in supportive housing will dramatically reduce the number of troubled New Yorkers bedding down on city streets and in municipal shelters, and will cost taxpayers the same as the City’s current reliance on shelters and emergency care. All that is missing is a genuine action plan, and genuine leadership from State and City officials, to make these effective investments.

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⁴⁷ New York City Department of Mental Health, *1998-2003 Local Government Plan for Adult Mental Health Services* (1998).

⁴⁸ More information about the “Campaign for a New York/New York III Agreement” is available at www.coalitionforthehomeless.org.