Politics, Policy Making, Data, and the Homeless

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Abstract

It is often said that a major obstacle to crafting effective policies concerning homelessness is the large uncertainty associated with estimates of the extent of the problem. Such uncertainty is due largely to the difficulties of identifying a "hidden" population. But how true is it that effective policy making for the homeless depends upon counting their population accurately? This paper reviews some critical relationships among politics, policy making, and data; examines data requirements for policy making affecting the homeless; argues the case for relative rather than absolute measurement; and assesses the importance for public policy of data problems in this area.

Introduction

Governments collect data for many purposes. The most elementary logic seems to indicate that those purposes should dictate the shape, scope, type, and precision of the data collected. However, often data collection seems to take on a life of its own and obscures the purpose that inspired it in the first place. Sometimes, this happens because past policy making in an area has not been well linked—or not even linked at all—to data, and the effort to correct that problem goes too far; or because there are fascinating challenges to researchers in developing data bases that can always be carried a little bit further; or because the attention to data was in fact intended to obscure the original purpose. But when the measurement state-of-the-art or existing data do not permit answers to policy questions, it is sometimes useful to return to the policy making needs that drove (or should have driven) data development in the first place to see whether some other way exists to meet those needs. Instead of assessing data exclusively on their own terms, it may be more productive to look at alternative ways of answering policy questions.

This paper makes the radical assertions (1) that data can serve policy making even when they are not perfect and (2) that the critical question should be not, How good are the data? but rather, What must be known to address the problem? To argue this case, this paper examines these areas:

- Current interactions between data, policy making, and politics;
- The particular difficulties of collecting adequate data on "hidden" populations such as the homeless;
- The general data needs that policy makers typically have in addressing social problems; and
- Data requirements to support a potential governmental policy on the homeless.

Interactions: Data, policy making, and politics

Since the year 1790, with the beginning of the U.S. government's effort to count its population, data have been collected in this country for a variety of reasons. Among these reasons are to permit an awareness of political, social, or economic changes that can signify national progress, stability, or regression; to inform the public of those changes; and to provide a tool for formulating, implementing, and evaluating policy to address those changes.

Because all these purposes relate intimately to governmental activities, it is not surprising that certain types of data (changes in the gross national product [GNP], for example, or in employment rates) tend to be linked not only to policy making but to politics. Improvements in the GNP or in the unemployment rate tend to strengthen the position of those in power; conversely, unfavorable trends may bring about calls for change and turnover in government. In one extreme case (China, after the "Hundred Flowers" in 1958), the routine development of a statistical series brought down the agency that generated it. When critics of the new regime were able to point out that per capita income had undergone a long decline after the advent of the People's Republic in 1949, the carefully run State Statistical Bureau that had developed the data fell into disfavor. For a long time after 1958, national data were not routinely produced in China, and such critical information as the size of the Chinese population or of the gross domestic product remained a matter of conjecture.

Data can thus be tremendously powerful in the political life of an agency, a government, or a nation. It does seem unlikely that in the United States, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, say, could be disbanded because of a rise in unemployment rates. But it would be highly typical that, in the short term, such unemployment figures might cause painful congressional questions to be addressed to the

Council of Economic Advisors (among others). And over the long term, governmental economic and labor policies might be affected.

On the other hand, it is true that over the past ten years or so, data series have been terminated that would have informed the public of such things as the changing social and economic status of U.S. cities and their populations, at the very same time that policies and programs targeting the problems of urban places and their low-income residents were also terminated.[1] This development, of course, reflects the Reagan Administration's stated view that once a program is terminated, data are no longer required about the program, about the problem that generated it, or about the people who would have been its beneficiaries.[2] Although this is a highly controversial idea (data are not collected uniquely for the benefit of executive branch policy makers, but also for congressional oversight and many other public uses), it nonetheless demonstrates the close link that now exists between data and policy making, at least in a negative sense. That is, if the policy goes, the data go with it, regardless of the problem's status. In addition, data and policy making are linked perceptually, as in 1958 China, because eliminating the data that reveal the magnitude and direction of a social problem does three things: It lowers perceptions of the problem; it reduces public pressure for solving it; and it renders the lack of policy making to address it less visible.

In the face of a real and growing social problem, however, failure to collect data can make the problem *more* visible. At the same time, the problem develops an aura of mystery and rhetoric, along with a bewildering variety of estimates about its true size and characteristics. Thus, different groups have advanced national estimates for the number of homeless that have ranged (in the same year) from 250,000 to 3 million[3] and estimates for the number of illegal aliens that have ranged from 1 million to 12 million.[4]

It is no accident that both of these wide-ranging estimates are in areas of public policy focusing on "hidden" populations. (This is not, of course, to suggest that all estimates are of equal value, but rather that, in these areas, even the best estimates may be uncertain.) Indeed, the members of hidden populations are either difficult to observe or, once observed, are difficult to identify as belonging to that population. Examples of such populations include the homeless[5] illegal aliens, tax evaders, criminals, victims of crime, people with stigmatizing diseases such as AIDS or mental illness, drug users, and other groups. Even though many researchers—at the Bureau of the Census, a number of universities, and elsewhere—have been grappling with the measurement problem for several

decades, and even though a great deal of progress has been made (especially in the field of identifying and counting the homeless in local areas), national estimates of hidden populations still remain uncertain, highly variable, hard to defend, and liable to set off political controversies that hurt rather than help an administration's ability to make policy.

Hidden populations and policy making

Hidden populations make it difficult for governments to address social problems. First, they prevent a clear and precise understanding of the size and nature of the problem to be addressed, and they are present in a great many areas of social policy making. In effect, hidden populations may arise whenever there is fear of, or shame about, a particular characteristic. People who have been victims of rape, who are illiterate, have AIDS, are homeless, or have been mentally ill tend not to want to talk about their situation and may instead seek to hide it. Understanding the size of these groups and the social problems they have experienced—whether the information is obtained through interview or survey—has, therefore, been difficult to achieve. Discussion of the problem is likely to be resisted by the people who know most about it, and nonresponse rates—even for so "innocuous" a social problem as low income—are very high.

Another situation involving hidden populations centers around illicit activities and their participants: criminals, tax evaders, illegal aliens, or drug users, for example. The ability, then, to identify and understand social problems caused or faced by hidden populations is tenuous to begin with because of attitudes held by the groups themselves. Still other measurement problems derive from the techniques researchers use to establish an accurate count of these groups and to learn about them.

Many different sources of bias afflict research on hidden populations. For example, in the work that the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) did in reviewing estimates of homeless populations, it became clear that the various ways of trying to identify them (e.g., through key informant surveys, one-time surveys of shelters, analyses of shelter use data, and surveys of streets and other public places) all presented difficulties. Some biases resulted from sampling; for example, important service delivery settings were overlooked or seasonal variation was not considered. Other biases resulted from measurement; for example, unknown numbers of errors were made in determining who was homeless; survey or interview respondents were potentially influenced by various

reasons to over report or underreport a count (e.g., shelter operators whose appropriations depended on receiving a certain number of homeless clients, or homeless parents unwilling to report their children's absence from school).

Hidden populations like the homeless are difficult for policy makers to deal with for a second reason. The same problems of attitude and bias that make it difficult to understand the size and nature of these populations also make it difficult to pinpoint trends about them—to discover whether things are getting worse, better, or remaining stable. A count of the homeless reflects only those who have been observed, identified, or otherwise estimated. But a hidden population, by definition, also contains members who remain uncounted and unknown. Therefore, a tally of the observed homeless is always an unknown fraction of the total count of homeless people (i.e., the universe of those who have been measured and reported plus those who have not). From a policy maker's viewpoint, this means that even if a count were conducted at regular intervals over time and compared, perhaps, from year to year, and a change in the population were found, it would not be possible to determine whether the actual number of homeless people had changed, or merely the number of people reported as homeless. A change in the number of reported homeless people would not necessarily reflect a change in the true size of that population.

Finally, there is a third reason why hidden populations make policy making difficult, at least at the national level, and that is the problem of generalization. To avoid the problem of generating both a credible national estimate and credible trend data for a hidden population like the homeless, a policy maker may opt instead for a more feasible strategy featuring strong local or subgroup data (e.g., in individual cities). But given that there is no national universe of the homeless from which to draw a sample and given that homelessness is not limited to cities (and even if it were, differences across cities are legion), how would it be possible to generalize from the subgroup to the nation as a whole? This strategy would leave the policy maker better able to deal with homelessness at the local level but unable to create the data for dealing with homelessness at the national level.

Do these data problems constitute a sufficient reason to avoid making policy for the homeless? It is certainly true that because of these data problems, answers are lacking to two of the most important questions in politics: Is the problem big enough to trigger federal involvement and resources? And if so, how could federal policy makers know whether their efforts to resolve or reduce

homelessness were successful? With regard to the first question, determining the size of the national homeless problem runs up against quite formidable measurement uncertainties and the inability to generalize. With regard to the second question, evaluating progress has similar difficulties, especially the noncomparability of measurements and data over time.

This is not to imply that research in this area has failed, only that data problems remain. Researchers have, in fact, continued efforts to deal with the problems of measuring hidden populations and have suggested many different methods for identifying and counting them. Among these are the "tagging," "window," and "indicators" methods.[6] All of these methods, however, require a great deal of other information (e.g., thorough knowledge of the problem's dynamics, diversity, and distribution) to be feasible. In the case of the homeless, so much needed information is missing that none of these methods seems viable.

In sum, then, there is currently a sense rather than an understanding of the magnitude, direction, and characteristics of homelessness. Also, successive administrations have made little or no effort to confront this particular social problem. Although some measurement and data problems besetting policy making for the homeless are indeed difficult, it is not clear that homelessness would be addressed even if measurement complexities were resolved and data on the homeless were impeccable. Is it, then, a lack of will or a lack of data that is keeping researchers from taking on the issue?

Imagine that this administration were to decide, in a reversal of policy, to confront the problem of homelessness, to put some of its best minds on crafting policies and programs, and to find the necessary resources to pay for them. Also assume that the only remaining problems are ones of measurement. Would it be possible to muster the data needed for the effort? What, then, are the minimal data requirements for policy making in this area? What kinds of data have policy makers used in the past to support similar problem-solving initiatives?

Social policy making and data needs[7]

Typically, policy makers in the executive and legislative branches of the federal government have used information for three broad, but distinct, purposes:

- For policy formulation—to assess or justify the need for an intervention and, based on experience, to design it optimally;

- For implementation—to ensure that, whatever the intervention, it is executed in the most cost-effective and technically competent way possible; and

- For accountability—to determine the effectiveness of the intervention and the need for its continuation, modification, or termination.

Of course, these purposes have specific implications for the kinds of data to be collected. For example, the purpose of policy formulation, as it applies to a new program, may require information that includes:

1. Data describing the social problem addressed by the program (How big is it? What is its frequency and direction? How is it changing?)

2. Data (both qualitative and quantitative) on the context of the social problem and on its profound and proximate derivations (What causes homelessness? How does the process develop whose end result is homelessness? What are the indicators that predict it? What are the key psychological and sociological outcomes of homelessness? etc.)

3. Data on the results of past programs or related efforts that attempted to deal with the problem (Were those programs based on knowledge of social problem dynamics and of the populations involved? Did they turn out to be feasible? successful? What difficulties did they encounter?) and data allowing the selection of one alternative program over another (What are the likely comparative costs and benefits? What kind of growth in costs was experienced?)

The information required for implementation is quite different from that required for policy formulation. This information includes:

4. Data on program operations (degree to which the program is implemented, whether it conforms to formulated policies and expectations, how much it costs, how practitioners and beneficiaries feel about it, etc.)

5. Data on program management (degree of control over expenditures, qualifications and credentials of personnel, allocation of resources, use of program information in decision making, etc.)

6. Data on the current state of the problem addressed by the program (Is the problem growing? Is it diminishing? Is it diminishing enough so that the program is no longer needed? Is it changing in terms of its significant characteristics?)

The purpose of accountability requires information from evaluation, which again differs markedly from that required for the other two policy purposes. This information includes:

7. Data on policy outcomes or short-term effects (What happened in the near term as a result of policy implementation?)

8. Data on the degree to which the policy made, or is making, a longer term difference (What change in the social problem occurred that can be directly attributed to the program?)

9. Data on the unexpected and expected effects of the policy (e.g., Was a program of drug education to prevent drug use followed by an increase in drug experimentation? Were clients of a job program hired, only to lose their jobs three months later?)

Policy formulation, implementation, and accountability, then, are three purposes from which a minimum-requirements data base for policy making can be derived. Can these policy information needs be reconciled with the problems discussed earlier about collecting data on hidden populations? And how, specifically, do those information needs apply to policy interventions for the homeless?

Data to support policy interventions for the homeless

As already noted, the purposes of policy formulation, implementation, and accountability lead to the identification of nine types of data that can be considered minimal requirements. Of these, six requirements (2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 9) concern data that are specifically related to the planning, management, and evaluation of social-policy interventions generally. As such, the hidden population data issues discussed earlier in this paper are not directly relevant. Three requirements, however (1, 6, and 8), do involve estimating the size and direction of hidden populations. These three will be discussed first.

Data needed for policy making that involve hidden population issues

Based on the problems involved in estimating hidden populations, are national data absolutely needed? Given that policy initiatives for the homeless would typically be in cities or metropolitan regions, is it essential for a federal intervention to have national data?

It does seem clear that in formulating a national policy on the homeless, it is important to know whether the number of homeless people is so large that it constitutes a national problem and, if it is, what response is appropriate to direct at that problem (requirement 1). Similarly, in accounting for intervention implementation and effects (requirements 6 and 8), knowing the size of the homeless population both before and after the intervention seems necessary to determine the effects of the intervention and the continuing need for it.

However, a national number or rate is not indispensable or even relevant for requirements 6 and 8, insofar as interventions for the homeless are local. In anti-crime programs and in interventions to treat people who have AIDS or who have been victims of crime, the critical before-and-after numbers are local ones. Survey methods have been developed that work very well for counting the homeless. In GAO's study of these methods, it was found that surveys produced sound local estimates of the number of "truly homeless" people and that nine of the ten studies identified as high quality were based on surveys.[8] (The strongest strategy used probability sampling techniques to select areas.[9]) On the other hand, if the "precariously housed" (especially, people living doubled up in conventional dwellings on a temporary basis) were to be included with the truly homeless in the population targeted for services, then new research likely would be needed to estimate this population.[10]

A need remains, then, (requirement 1) for a national estimate of the homeless problem. Although a great deal of work has gone into national estimation efforts, it does not seem likely, as noted earlier, that strong national estimates will be developed any time soon because of the methodological problems involved. But exactly at what level of precision is information needed for which particular policy purpose?

Looking again at requirement 1, there is no need—on practical grounds—for a precise estimate to determine whether the number of homeless is large enough to constitute a national problem. Such

a decision is political, not analytical. It is, for example, as likely to be based on an ideological view of whether federal dollars should be spent on a particular problem as on the size of the problem, even if it were shown to be very large via meticulously gathered data. Instead, over the past 15 years or so, social problems that are data rich and those that are data poor have been confronted by the same impartial inattention. The fact that the number of Americans (31 million) without health insurance is known, for example, whereas the number of homeless is unknown, seems to have made little perceptible difference in how these problems are treated. As Anatole France said, "Government achieves its most majestic equality when it forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges."

What data *must* do for policy makers, however, is to allow them to assess whether taxpayers' dollars are making a difference or not. That is, once a federal presence has been decided on to combat a social problem like homelessness, even if the locus of the effort is local, policy makers in both the executive and legislative branches of government will need to know whether progress is being made nationally.[11] Without question, it seems that researchers are handicapped by their inability to measure the size of hidden populations accurately and, from there, to estimate change in that size. But what if, instead of attempting absolute measurement, relative measures of change were used? This could be a reasonable approach if the key policy issue were not the magnitude of homelessness, but rather its growth or decline after some policy intervention.

As a hypothetical example, imagine that researchers know the actual number of people who are homeless in this country and that it is 300,000. To decrease this number, legislation is enacted that makes it harder to evict families with children and easier for such families, once homeless, to obtain inexpensive housing. Two years after the legislation's enactment, the number of homeless drops to 150,000. After eliminating competing explanations for this change (such as an improved local economy or a return to former police vagrancy/intoxication policies under which homeless people and alcoholics are "sheltered" in jails), researchers conclude that the legislation was successful in decreasing the number of homeless by 50 percent.

Now imagine that the actual numbers in the example remain the same but that there is no way of knowing what they are. To evaluate the legislation, researchers must estimate the homeless population for the years before and after the legislation. The method used generates a "before" estimate of 100,000 entries and an "after" of 50,000. Both numbers would of course be "off" by a factor of two.

Nevertheless, the relative change in the homeless population based on the estimated numbers parallels the relative change based on the actual numbers—a 50 percent decrease. Similarly, if researchers used some other method to estimate that the figures for each year were 500,000 and 250,000, respectively, researchers would have reached the same conclusion about relative change.[12]

GAO has, in fact, proposed that a multi-indicator approach be used for calculating relative change in the national homeless population.[13] A system of independent indicators would have to be developed; for example, changes could be measured in the number of beds in emergency shelters, in the number of meals served in soup kitchens, in the number of single-room occupancy hotels, and so forth. If all these separate indicators changed in similar directions over time, it could be confidently concluded that homelessness was in fact increasing or decreasing.[14]

Needed policy making data unrelated to hidden population issues

Looking back at the list of the nine data requirements discussed earlier, if 1, 6, and 8 are eliminated, it can be seen that, as in social policy making generally, three types of data—from basic social research, from applied research, and from administrative systems—would be needed across the policy intervention process described to fulfill six requirements (2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 9). These three types of data are:

1. *Data from basic social research (requirement 2).* Program and policy planners need information from basic social research to answer fundamental policy formulation questions; such as, What causes homelessness? What are its processes? How can it be predicted? What institutions stand between an individual or family and homelessness? What are the salient characteristics of homelessness and how are they distributed across the general population?

2. *Data from applied research (requirements 3, 7, and 9).* These data are needed both for policy formulation and for the demonstration of effectiveness (accountability). During policy formulation, data are required on what has been learned and not learned from prior problem-solving interventions; analysis is needed on what the relative advantages are of alternative homeless initiatives and on how a new program should be structured.

At the accountability stage, program evaluation data will be needed to show what the intervention's effectiveness may have been, to examine the experience of program beneficiaries and practitioners, and to understand the intervention's impact over time.

3. *Data from administrative systems built up around the program (requirements 4 and 5).* These data are needed both for implementation and accountability: to keep the intervention on track, to ensure that homeless populations are properly targeted and reached, to monitor intervention management and costs, and to learn from ongoing experience of the program.

No obvious special problems seem to emerge, *a priori,* in applying these general types of data to a policy for the homeless. Still, experience dictates five cautionary points. First, it seems essential that any intervention be based on a solid understanding of what homelessness is—what forms it may take, what predicts it, who is affected by it, what areas of the problem remain murky. The state of this basic research knowledge is absolutely critical to design an effective intervention, not only to draw upon what is already known but also to build into the program the elements structured to develop the missing knowledge. Also, once developed, such research could advance the potential use of reverse sampling to obtain independent estimates of the national homeless population.

Second, program administrative data systems and program process and effectiveness evaluations should be planned at the same time as the intervention structure. Although it cannot be guaranteed that this early planning effort will produce exactly the information expected, nonetheless, if it is done well, it is at least possible that the information will be forthcoming. If it is not done, some very valuable knowledge about what works in reducing homelessness will be lost. Third, listening to, understanding, and using the experience of practitioners and beneficiaries (among others) in an intervention is the key both to optimal participation rates and to ultimate effectiveness. Fourth, evaluations should be produced on a continuing basis, so that people get used to them, problems can be corrected, successes can be built upon, and sponsors and the public can be informed regularly about progress.

Finally, the two objectives of a policy initiative in a new area—learning what works and serving people—can sometimes conflict. Therefore, it is important to start small, to balance learning and service, until enough knowledge is acquired to expand the intervention confidently.

Conclusion

This paper has laid out, in a general way, some minimal data requirements for planning, implementing, and evaluating interventions to help homeless people. Despite the difficult problems involved in measuring hidden populations such as the homeless, this discussion concludes that (1) it is less important, from a policy viewpoint, to achieve a precise count of the homeless than to determine whether their number is rising or declining; (2) the data necessary for developing, designing, and assessing the results of a homeless policy are in fact obtainable; and (3) even the most impeccable data will not ensure strong policy making without the political will to deal seriously with the problem.

Finally, with regard to politics, it is important to understand that the issue is not one of political party, even though much of the discussion in this paper has revolved around positions taken (or not taken) by a Republican administration. Rather, it is the interaction of data and politics—*any* politics—that is of concern. If the past ten years had been spent under a Democratic administration, the criticism here would undoubtedly have focused on the kind of political behavior Charles Beard described: "seeking out problems, finding them everywhere, diagnosing them wrong, and applying unsuitable remedies." Macaulay elegantly distinguished between these two kinds of politics, defining them as "passive" and "paternal." He said:

> I hardly know which is the greater pest to society, a paternal government which intrudes itself into every part of human life, and which thinks it can do everything for everybody better than anybody can do anything for himself; or a careless, lounging government, which suffers grievances—that it could at once remove—to grow and multiply, and which, to all complaint and remonstrance, has only one answer: "we must let things take their course; we must let things find their own level."

Macaulay made those remarks in 1846, but policy analysts today would do well to remember them. The fact is that when government must deal with social problems, neither data nor politics are ever likely to be perfect. The challenge is to understand their vulnerabilities and make sound policy by taking them into account.

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Endnotes

1. Eleanor Chelimsky, "Budget Cuts, Data, and "valuation," *Society* 22:3 (March/April 1985): 65-73.

2. Christopher DeMuth, cited in Ann Crittenden, "A World with Fewer Numbers," *The New York Times,* July 11, 1982.

3. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Homeless Mentally Ill: Problems and Options in Estimating Numbers and Trends* (GAO/PEMD-8-24), 29. (Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1988).

4. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Problems and Options in Estimating the Size of the Illegal Alien Population* (GAO/IPE-82-9), 4. (Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1988).

5. The "truly homeless" are, in fact, sheltered formally and informally—or not sheltered—in many different places and are thus difficult to observe and count. The "precariously housed" (who may be doubled up in shared private homes) are usually not observable at all but may nonetheless be counted to some degree—depending on how long they stay in shared housing—by the Bureau of the Census and other data collectors.

6. The "tagging" method is based on the assumption that the frequency with which members of a population are observed is related to the size of that population. (This means that if there are many homeless, researchers should expect to encounter them more frequently than if there are few.) The "window" method involves counting all members of a population observed during a specific period of time and within a specific geographic area. The term "window" is used because the analyst constructs a window in time and space through which to make observations. Both the tagging and the window methods use the concept of "reverse sampling." Instead of trying to estimate an appropriate sample size on the basis of a known universe, one observes some sample and bases an estimate of the universe on the number of observations in the sample. The most frequent use of both tagging and window methods has been in estimating wildlife populations.

   The "indicators" method involves choosing a variable known to be strongly related to population size, observing it, and using it as an indicator of size. For example, analysts have used the number of heroin deaths to estimate the number of heroin users; the number of arrests for drunken drivers has been used to estimate the number of problem drinkers. In each case, the indicator variable is easier to observe accurately than is the whole population.

7. The intent here is not to be exhaustive. Many policy making purposes exist other than those cited, and the data requirements given are minimal. The point is to see what impact the lack of national data on homelessness might have on the ability to make policy in this area.

8. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Homeless Mentally Ill,* 2, 16, 25.

9. P. Rossi, G. A. Fisher, and G. Willis, *The Condition of the Homeless of Chicago* (Amherst, MA: Social and Demographic Research Institute, University of Massachusetts, and Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 1986).

10. GAO's efforts to estimate numbers of children in families who were precariously housed revealed great gaps in the information needed to provide counts of this population. (See U.S. General Accounting *Office, Children and Youths: About 68,000 Homeless and 186,000 in Shared Housing at Any Given Time* (GAO/PEMD-89-14), 23. (Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989).

11. This political lesson was learned during the policy debate on the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration in the 1970s. Even though most anti-crime efforts had been funded at the local level, the policy question asked (and the one that eventually brought down the agency) was national in scope: After the expenditure of so many billions of local anti-crime dollars, do Americans feel any safer?

12. This example is derived from U.S. General Accounting Office, *Problems and Options,* 19-20.

13. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Homeless Mentally Ill, 54.*

14. Some may argue that these particular indicators reflect not only the extent of the problem of homelessness but also, at least to some degree, the response to that problem. Thus a rise in the number of beds used could indicate, in the extreme case, not increased homelessness, but increased outreach. It would, of course, be best if a set of indicators from completely independent sources could be devised. However, even in their absence, the potential confounding could be dealt with as was the increase in rape rates in the 1970s when the women's movement made rape reporting a priority: by estimating how much of the increase constituted a reporting artifact and how much was real. This would be easier in the case of homelessness because independent benchmarks exist (public assistance program figures, for example, and data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation) against which the purported change in homelessness could be compared.