

Police Deny Inventing Empty Beds on Skid Row

By Anat Rubin
Daily Journal Staff Writer

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LOS ANGELES - Los Angeles police officials deny critics' contention that they are fabricating the number of beds available on Skid Row to justify arrests of homeless people.

At issue is the number of available beds at seven shelters that the LAPD's Central division, which includes Skid Row, calls every night.

While police officials insist they generally find 70 to 150 beds available at these shelters, shelter officials say their facilities are full.

"Maybe there's a disconnect between what we're being told [by staff members] and what the executive directors at the shelters say," said Central division **captain** Andrew Smith.

"If we've gotten incorrect numbers from someone in the past, then we're working to rectify that in the future," he said. "But there are no evil machinations here."

Available shelter has become a contentious factor in the current debate on Skid Row policy.

LAPD has made public the number of beds it finds every night, to demonstrate that many people on the streets are "shelter-resistant" and living on the streets by choice, Smith said.

"It's clear that there are not enough shelter beds for every person on the street in Skid Row," he said. "But apparently there are shelter beds for people who want them."

LAPD call logs show that most of the shelters are full. Most of the empty beds the LAPD finds empty are at Transition House and Union Rescue Mission.

Union Rescue Mission reported beds available for women on top bunks. But an official at the shelter said disabled or older women have a difficult time reaching those beds.

Homeless advocates accused the LAPD of manufacturing the number of empty beds to justify stricter law enforcement strategies in the area.

But Smith said his officers no longer arrest people for sleeping on the street at night, and he downplayed the importance of the number of available shelter beds on any given night.

He said the number of beds is "extremely minor in the scope of the LAPD's efforts downtown."

The issue of available beds was thrust into the limelight by an ACLU lawsuit contending that police cannot arrest homeless people for sleeping or lying on the street when there is a shortage of shelter beds in the city.

With 14,000 shelter beds for the county's 90,000 homeless people, what the police call "quality of life" arrests amount to cruel and unusual punishment under the Eighth Amendment, the 9th Circuit ruled.

The LAPD counts 1,500 to 2,000 people on the streets of Skid Row on an average night.

"The key here is we're not trying to enforce our way out of homelessness," Smith said. "Homelessness is not the Police Department's issue. Lawlessness is the Police Department's issue."

The debate about Los Angeles County's homeless problem has focused on police efforts downtown, in large part because of the ACLU lawsuit.

"We're certainly a part of the solution to the problems of Skid Row," Smith said. "But we are not the solution to homelessness."

Critics have called Central division's nightly bed count "creative accounting."

But Smith said "nothing could be further from the truth."

"It's a simple phone call to these service providers every night," he said. "There's nothing creative about it."

Smith takes issue with accusations that his officers are providing inaccurate information.

"I would say we could not be more transparent," he said.