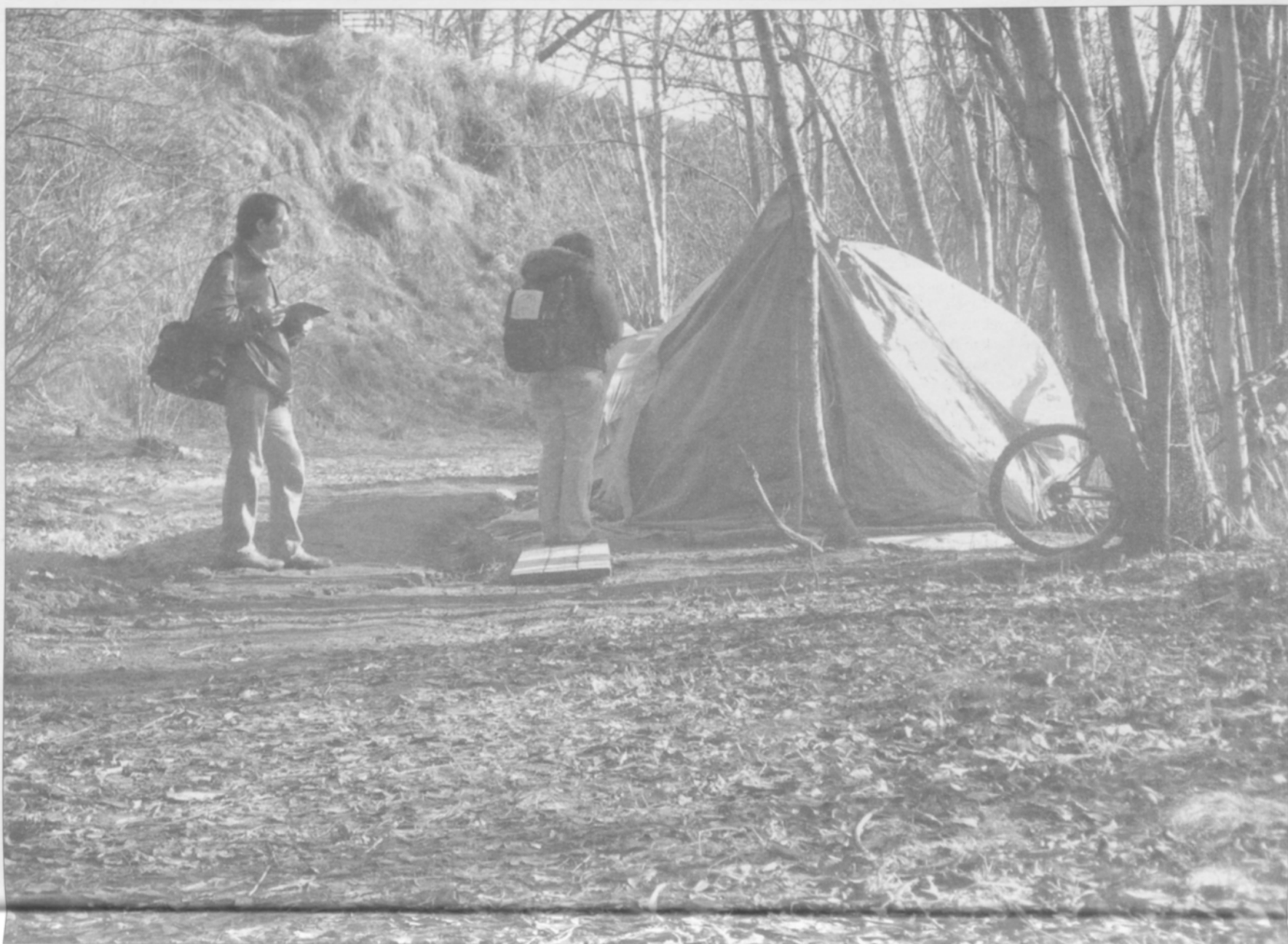




Workers with Janus Youth approach a tent in the woods as part of the Portland street count conducted at the end of January.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JANUS YOUTH

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youth. The evening of Jan. 27, he and two other outreach workers took street count surveys on their regular tour of downtown. None of them had given the survey before.

"It's going to be awkward," Schwanz predicted.

Their first stop was a weekly dinner service in the basement of First Baptist Church. Over a hundred people — mostly youths under 21, and a few families with children — crowded around long folding tables. The outreach team passed out their usual offerings of hygiene products and warm socks, checked in with kids they knew, and squeezed between chairs to fill out survey forms.

Some people had already been counted earlier in the week. Some were staying in shelters, so they would be tallied in the shelter count instead. Some had slept outside on and off; some had been on the streets for years, like the 24-year-old who said he'd been homeless since 14. Some laughed at the phrasing of the first question: "Are you currently experiencing homelessness?"

For the purposes of the street count, "homeless" means "unsheltered and sleeping in a place that is not meant for human habitation" — streets, parks, campgrounds, abandoned buildings.

However, people sleeping in those places are subject to citation under the city's anti-camping ordinance, which prohibits overnighting on public land. They can be fined, jailed or excluded from public spaces. The ordinance is currently the subject of a class-action lawsuit, which alleges that outlawing camping when shelters are full is cruel and unusual punishment.

Critics of the count say that because of the camping ordinance, people are intentionally hard to find so law enforcement won't find them.

"To say that you went out and got every single person would just be ridiculous," said Monica Beemer, Sisters' executive director.

However, those who run the count say that while a few people may be missed, most people who sleep outside are accounted for.

"Each time, I think our methods have gotten a little bit better," said Sally Erickson, who manages the Bureau of Housing and Community Development's homelessness programs. She says the bureau has worked with the count's critics to try to make improvements. "There are going to be people who think it's an overcount and people who think it's an undercount. And I've heard both," she added.

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Some people the Yellow Brick Road team surveyed weren't sure which boxes to check.

Near Pioneer Courthouse Square, a 31-year-old man said he'd been crashing on a friend's couch for two months. Was he homeless?

On the sidewalk outside First Baptist Church, a 21-year-old man said he had been traveling as a D.J. and ended up marooned in Portland with no money and an expired ID. He had no place to stay, he said, but he usually went to bars and found "random girls" to go home with for the night. Was he homeless?

Critics of the count's methodology also say that because it misses people living in hotels, sleeping on couches or sharing too-small living spaces with friends or family, the total from the street and shelter counts is a serious underestimation of the true homeless population.

HUD's 2008 report to Congress, which incorporated information from street and shelter counts nationwide, noted that most

people who become homeless do so after wearing out their welcome in someone else's housing unit. That was especially the case for families, the report said.

Erika Silver, program director at Human Solutions, said many of her clients fit that bill. Human Solutions runs shelters and housing assistance programs for families in Portland and Gresham.

"There's a lot of families that live in those really marginal and doubled-up kind of situations," Silver said.

Others who may fall through the count's cracks are those like Ted Palmer, a Street Roots vendor, and the three other men who live with him in a double motel room on Interstate Avenue. The four use the money they earn selling the paper to pay \$65 a night for the room, where two of them sleep on the floor. It adds up to almost \$500 a month for each of them.

After living outside for over a year, Palmer started renting the room two months ago, because he was "tired of sleeping out on the street, tired of not knowing whether police are going to harass me or not, (and) tired of my stuff getting taken."

Though he and his roommates don't fit into the street count, Palmer says he definitely considers himself homeless. If

they didn't make money selling Street Roots, he said, "We'd all be probably out on the streets."

Officials acknowledge that couch-surfers and the like are an important and largely uncounted group, but they say there is no good way to track that population.

"We would love to find those people," said Julie Osburn, who runs the shelter count for Multnomah County. Shelters count both people who are sleeping there and people who are turned away for lack of space. The turnaway data is then folded into the street count. The shelter count forms do collect information on why people are seeking shelter, so those who are staying with someone else or were just kicked out can mark it down.

"The people who are captured in the shelter count are people who tried to get help. If they didn't call in, phone in

(or) walk in during the count, we can't capture them," Osburn said.

Osburn didn't know how that group could be better included, but she said the impetus would have to come down from the federal level.

Near Pioneer Courthouse Square, the Yellow Brick Road team approached a middle-aged man carrying a large backpack. He immediately recognized the survey, but refused to participate.

"You know the number they came up with (last time)? Fourteen hundred?" he

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