BY DENIS SLATTERY
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FOR almost a decade, one cold night each winter, thousands of volunteers have taken to the pavement in an attempt to count the homeless people living on the streets of New York City. On Monday night, they will be at it again.

The annual Homeless Outreach Population Estimate, or HOPE, is a Department of Homeless Services-run program meant to count the number of unsheltered individuals, and it arrives each year with its fair share of controversy.

"The estimate that they put out every year is just that, an estimate," said Patrick Markee, a senior policy analyst with Coalition for the Homeless.

"It doesn't do very much to educate the public about the truth about homelessness. The vast majority of homeless people in New York City are in the shelter system, not on the streets."

DHS commissioner Seth Diamond said the count is only one part of the city's effort.

"It's an important marker that we can compare from year to year," he said. "It provides a continuing check as to our progress with those that are on the street. . . . It is part of our year-long effort.

"A lot of people on the street don't want to go to shelters, and that is one of the things that we looked at and it helped us with our short-term transitional facilities."

The results of 2012's street survey showed that the Bronx had an increase in homeless people, with 169, compared with 115 in 2011. While the count has shown a significant decrease in "street homelessness" in the Bronx over the last seven years, the number of people staying in shelters operated by DHS has climbed to 47,989 individuals city-wide, almost half of which are children, according to the agency's most recent reports.

The Bronx is home to 78 of the city's 235 shelters and has also seen an increase in the number of DHS-approved cluster sites, where individual apartments are used as temporary homeless residences.

"Opening new shelters and expanding the system is not fighting homelessness," said Kendall Jackman, 57, a former postal worker who has lived in a Bronx shelter for the past three years and is a member of Picture the Homeless, an advocacy group.

"It's just one night. The HOPE count is not a complete number by any stretch of the imagination. It's a statistic that they release to divert attention away from the real problems like the lack of affordable housing and the state of the shelters," Jackman said.

Ralph Acevedo, program director for BronxWorks, has led volunteers in each of the last six surveys, and believes that the count is instrumental to homeless outreach programs in the borough.

"Even though it's one night out of the year, that one night will help us target the areas where there are homeless individuals. And it demonstrates that the services that we provide are effective," said Acevedo.

"In the Bronx, the decline is clearly accurate," Acevedo continued. "All of our services are based on these numbers, and I know that our program works based on the information we get from the HOPE count." olslaterry@nynodailynews.com

Homeless family enters the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing Center on E. 151st St. on Thursday. A 2012 street survey revealed that the borough had increase in number of homeless people compared with 2011. Photo by Denis Slattery.