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With no phone or reliable mailing address, Kyle Waller is a Louisville resident the Census Bureau may have a hard time tracking down when it begins the 2010 count next month.

Day jobs as a janitor and in construction have kept Waller, 31, supplied with pocket change, he said, but he's had no home of his own since last fall, when he was laid off from a sales job. Since then, Waller said he has been living on friends' couches in the Highlands and Germantown, while staying in touch with family via e-mail and Facebook.

"I haven't been counted by the Census since I was a teenager living at home with my parents in Nashville," said Waller. "My mail goes to three different places."

Foreclosures, rising poverty and unemployment have added to the numbers of people like Waller — and counting them is expected to pose a serious challenge during the 2010 Census.

Known as the hidden homeless, many of them may avoid participating because they fear it will somehow jeopardize those providing their shelter, said Ben Johnson, the U.S. Census Bureau's Kentucky team leader.

So Census officials are working with Louisville metro government, faith-based groups, social-service agencies and others to get across the message: Information given on Census questionnaires is confidential.

"It's not going to affect your status because (the) landlord, owner of the property, will never know," Johnson said.

Getting an accurate count of an area's homeless population is an inexact science at best, though experts frequently use the number of students from homeless families to gauge an area's homeless population.

In Louisville, that number is expected to be 10,000 this year — up from 1,000 when the last Census was taken in 2000, according to Jefferson County Public Schools.

Louisville residents can expect to receive the 2010 Census questionnaires in the mail in mid-March, Johnson said. Census takers will visit households that don't return their forms starting in May.

Besides population bragging rights, the census determines how much federal money Louisville and other cities receive for programs ranging from education to the H1N1 vaccine. Missing potentially thousands of people would lead to missing out on money.

That includes Jefferson County's school system. For instance, the census count determines how much federal Title I money goes to schools with large populations of low-income or disadvantaged students.

Anne Malone, coordinator of the school system's homeless education program, said Superintendent Sheldon Berman is appealing to all families to participate.

"Counting children is an advantage for the school district, because services for children are directly linked back to the count," she said.

Getting door answered

In the 1990s, the National Center on Family Homelessness tried to get reliable data on families who were doubled up with friends or relatives, but it found that many people simply didn't answer the door, said Ellen Bassuk, the center's president.

The same trend could happen during this census, she said. "I would guess it's going to be a very big undercount."

Nationwide, Census officials expect high numbers of homeless given the economic climate, said J. Clayton Barbour, a spokesman for the Charlotte Regional Census Office.

"That's why we have made a special point of working on a local basis to touch base and build connections with people who are on the ground level and know where this problem exists," he said.

In Lexington, for example, Census officials are working with a group of homeless people called the Street Voice Council to help get a count of their peers.

In Louisville, the Coalition for the Homeless will direct Census workers to hard-to-find homeless camps under bridges and overpasses and in wooded areas. That count is scheduled for March 29-31.

But, Marlene Gordon, the coalition's executive director, said families living in temporary housing "are hard to find." For example, public housing residents, she said, might be leery of disclosing how many people are living in their apartments, even if the information is confidential.

"It doesn't alleviate the fear of someone ... who lives in fear of being kicked out if they find their child or grandchildren are living there," Gordon said.

The Louisville Metro Housing Authority plans to post informational census posters at housing it operates and to send fliers to residents encouraging their participation, Executive Director Tim Barry said.

Asked if the information will tell residents that the survey's results are private, Barry said: "If it doesn't say that, it will — that this information is confidential, so please be honest and forthright with the folks from the Census Bureau."

Cathe Dykstra, executive director of the nonprofit Family Scholar House, said the Census Bureau contacted her recently to ensure that the single-parent college students in her program are counted — including about 700 families that receive services but don't live in apartments provided by Family Scholar House. The majority of those families are homeless and living in temporary situations, Dykstra said.

"At least I feel that there's an emphasis this year to make sure those people are counted."

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