

NEWS

Study Shows Small Drop in Homelessness



A study released last week found that homelessness has dropped by 3% in Los Angeles County since 2009. *Photo by Gary Leonard.*

Two-Year Comparison Suggests Minor Reduction, Along With Surge in Homeless Vets

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DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - On paper, the homeless capital of America looks like this: On any given night, 51,390 people sleep on the streets, in missions and in other temporary shelters like cars or abandoned buildings.

That's the key finding in a study released this week by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, the joint city-county agency that coordinates regional homeless services funding and, by federal mandate, conducts a census of the area's homeless population every two years.

The study indicates a 3% drop in homelessness in Los Angeles County since 2009, when the population was 52,931, according to LAHSA. The report carries a 5% margin of error.

Figures for individual districts, including Skid Row, which has the region's highest concentration of homelessness, have not yet been released. In the coming months, the city will further parse the data and release information on homeless populations by council district.

LAHSA Executive Director Michael Arnold said that the study is a relief because it means that the sour economy hasn't pushed more people outside. The relatively stable figure during a two-year period of pronounced unemployment, he said, is evidence that the regional approach is making a dent in the problem.

"I think the report is really good news," Arnold said. "Given that we've had an increase in national poverty, we were all concerned that that would drive homelessness up, but we're pretty much holding stable."

Others greeted the study with caution. Rev. Andy Bales, CEO of Skid Row's Union Rescue Mission, was among a chorus of critics who argued that LAHSA's 2009 count grossly underreported the number of

homeless families. It said there were 4,885 people in homeless families two years ago, a drop from 16,643 in 2007.

The criticism prompted LAHSA to later add 4,878 more individuals to its tally of homeless family members. The number added families that, during the 2009 count, had been temporarily housed through a county program that provides motel or hotel fare.

The new report claims another drop in homeless families, from 9,763 in 2009 to 9,218 individuals this year. Bales, however, said the data isn't reflected in the Union Rescue Mission, which is currently serving 55 families.

"That's eight less than our all time high, in October 2008," Bales said. "There's been no measurable let-up."

City vs. County

The Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count was executed during three days in January when some 4,000 volunteers canvassed city and county streets tallying the homeless. LAHSA also conducted a demographic survey over two months, interviewing individuals on the street and in shelters to gather data including the person's age, military history and whether they battled substance addiction.

The 2011 count found a surge in homeless military veterans, with a pronounced spike among women. In 2009, the count recorded 5,939 homeless vets, who represented 15% of the county's homeless population. This year, that number jumped to 7,221. Homeless female veterans have increased 51%, from 601 to 909. The agency has yet to come up with a theory for why so many women veterans are becoming homeless.

There is some evidence in the study that programs specific to the city of Los Angeles are making a bigger impact on homelessness than county efforts.

The study indicated a 9% drop in the homeless population living — sheltered and un-sheltered — within city borders. The reduction comes after a two-year period during which Downtown added more than 700 units of affordable housing. Most of that is in Skid Row and targets the recently homeless. All of it was built, in part, with assistance from the city and its Affordable Housing Trust Fund.

Ninth District Councilwoman Jan Perry credited the city's focus on housing, and using city funding sources as leverage to help developers tap other dollars, for helping to reduce the homeless population.

The city and county have historically been at odds when it comes to caring for the homeless, with the city funneling its dollars to housing, and the county focusing on mental health and social services. That fracture has largely prevented a regional approach that many argue is necessary if the region is ever to substantially reduce the homeless population.

"It's an issue that is still screaming loud for a real regional solution that requires a substantive commitment to leverage resources and subsidies and build housing that is supportive," Perry said.

Funding at the national level remains a conundrum for Los Angeles. While the count is a prerequisite for acquiring federal dollars, the actual size of the homeless population does not play a role in a city's allocated resources, Arnold said. The U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development's formula relies instead on factors such as age of the housing stock. As a result, Los Angeles is regularly under-funded compared to other cities.

In 2009, Los Angeles received about \$1,706 per homeless person in federal funding, based on the \$82 million the region got in HUD's so-called McKinney-Vento money, according to an analysis by the United Way. By comparison, Chicago, where the 2009 homeless count was 6,240, got \$8,119 per person.

Home for Good, a coalition of business leaders from the L.A. Area Chamber of Commerce working with the United Way to end homelessness in Los Angeles, considers changing the McKinney-Vento formula a priority. The group, which last year traveled to Washington in part to lobby for a change in the formula, is focused primarily on housing the region's chronically homeless, including people suffering from mental illness and substance addiction. Studies show that this group is the most costly for society since the chronically homeless frequently end up in emergency rooms and jails.

It's a segment of L.A.'s homeless that, according to the 2011 count, remained relatively stable, going from 10,245 in 2009 to 10,901 this year, or 24% of the county's entire homeless population.

But Jerry Neuman, co-chair of Home for Good, said the apparent stability is more indicative of a need for more focused resources for the region's most vulnerable individuals.

"The chronically homeless are not a static population," said Neuman. "What this tells me is that we are barely keeping up with the demand set by chronic homelessness."

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