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US homeless population up slightly, as ranks grow outside cities

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Despite high unemployment and a stalled economy, the nation's homeless population grew only slightly in 2010 as stimulus-funded initiatives helped to take or keep nearly 700,000 people off the streets, according to a federal report released Tuesday.

While once a predominantly urban problem largely of individuals without families, homelessness, like poverty, has increasingly migrated to suburban and rural areas where more non-Hispanic white families are being affected. In fact, the number of homeless people in households with at least one adult and one child has increased 20 percent since 2007, and families make up a larger share of those in emergency housing than ever before.

About 1.6 million people spent at least one night in emergency housing last year, up 2.2 percent from 2009. Nearly 650,000 were likely to be homeless on a given night in 2010, compared with 643,000 in 2009.

These modest increases reported in the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress not only reflect the success of anti-homeless Recovery Act initiatives, but also a bipartisan push to house "chronically homeless" people with severe disabilities and long histories of homelessness.

Since the recession first hit in December 2007, the number of chronically homeless Americans has fallen 11 percent to 109,920 in 2010. Meanwhile, the number of long-term housing beds to accommodate them has increased 34 percent over the same period.

"Think about that," said Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan. "Even at the height of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, homelessness barely ticked up. And with this report, we know why."

This year's report, prepared by HUD, is the first to reflect the impact of the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program, which provided rent and other payments to prevent some 531,000 people from becoming homeless. The program steered another 159,000 from the streets and emergency shelters into permanent housing. In fact, 94 percent of people assisted by the program found permanent housing.

"That is an impressive record," Donovan said. "... Absent these tools, we would have a lot more homeless people living on our streets."

Estimates in the report are based on a single-night "snapshot" count of the homeless in dozens of U.S. cities, along with full-year statistics from shelters across the country.

Of the nearly 650,000 homeless during the one-night count, 62 percent were in a shelter, while 38 percent were unsheltered, sleeping on the streets, in cars or abandoned buildings. The capacity of residential programs for the homeless increased by 3 percent, or nearly 18,000 beds, from 2009 to 2010.

While the overall homeless population held fairly steady in 2010, the problem has cut a new path of suffering during the recession.

Since 2007, the number of people using homeless services in cities fell 17 percent, to 1 million, in 2010. But people seeking emergency and transitional housing in suburban and rural areas jumped 57 percent, from 367,000 in 2007 to 576,000 last year.

Overall, the share of homeless people housed in non-urban shelters went from 23 percent in 2007 to 36 percent last year. Over the same period, shelter stays have grown shorter in suburban and rural areas as facilities try to accommodate more people, while average stays in urban homeless programs have grown longer as they serve fewer people.

Donovan said the suburbanization of homelessness isn't surprising, given the economy and the fact that more resources have been devoted to fighting chronic homelessness, particularly among veterans.

That will change in the coming months as more grants, pilot programs and housing vouchers go to address homelessness among struggling non-urban families. "We're rapidly catching up" in programming for rural families, Donovan said.

Last year, the Obama administration unveiled a plan to end homelessness among some of the nation's most vulnerable groups within the next decade. "Opening Doors" calls for ending child and family homelessness by 2020, while wiping out chronic homelessness by 2015.

Donovan said the program's goal of ending homelessness among veterans by 2015 is "within our grasp."

Nationally, nearly 250 communities have plans to end homelessness, and 84 percent are 10-year plans, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Other findings from the report:

-Nationally, California, New York and Florida account for 40 percent of the nation's homeless population, but only 25 percent of total U.S. population.

-The number of homeless persons in the U.S. has fallen 3.3 percent from 2007 to 2010. That overall decline stems entirely from a steep drop in homelessness in Los Angeles between 2007 and 2009.

ON THE WEB

2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress: <http://bit.ly/khNwtf>

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