



California's 2009 Homeless Count Summary

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Introduction

Homelessness is a complicated issue, but one thing is certain: California has the highest number of homeless persons than any other state. In spite of having the highest number of homeless persons, the state of California does not conduct any annual homeless counts or analysis. Each year, communities throughout California conduct their own "point-in-time" homeless counts — counting as many homeless persons as possible in one 24-hour period — in an effort to create snapshots showing the number of homeless people in their communities and determine what resources are needed to address homelessness at the local level.

The following findings are based on Housing California's analysis of homeless-count data from 36 communities throughout the state.

Snapshot of California's 2009 Homeless Counts (as provided by 36 regions):

- 58% of respondents saw the number of homeless persons increase from 2007 to 2009.
- More than 62% of the homeless persons counted were "unsheltered" (did not have any form of shelter at all); 37.5% were staying in emergency or temporary (transitional) housing. (Because it is much easier to obtain an accurate tally of those in emergency or temporary housing, it is likely that the 62% "unsheltered" homeless is an undercount.)
- On average, 44.3% of homeless persons reported being homeless for more than one year.
- Of those communities that tracked employment, the average percentage of homeless persons who were employed was 24.6%.
- Of those communities that tracked persons receiving some form of government assistance, 51.9% were found to be recipients.
- Most communities found that at least 20% of their homeless population was over the age of 50. The aging of homeless populations is a serious concern, as it will likely increase demand for public-health services that are already extremely overburdened and costly.
- When asked, the top two responses to "Why are you homeless?" were (1) Not enough affordable places to live and (2) Unable to pay rent due to unemployment.

According to the California Department of Education, nearly 150,000 school-aged children experienced homelessness in the 2008–09 school year.

Demographics Holding Steady

The 2009 demographic breakdown of California's homeless population holds similar to previous years' analysis:

- The average percentage of chronic homeless persons (those persons with repeated or extremely long episodes of homelessness) is 26.0%.
- The average percentage of homeless persons with mental illness is 24.7%.
- The average percentage of homeless persons experiencing some sort of disabling condition is 56%.
- The average percentage of homeless persons who are veterans is 10.1%.
- The average percentage of homeless persons experiencing substance abuse is 27.4%.
- The average percentage of persons homeless due to domestic violence is 13%. (The percentages are even higher when surveying only homeless females.)

Rural Counties not Immune from Homelessness

Homelessness is not just an urban problem. When looking solely at the 12 rural counties that performed 2009 homeless counts, the following was found.

When compared to urban areas:

- Rural counties have much higher percentages of female homeless persons and much higher rates of persons homeless due to domestic violence.
- Rural counties have higher rates of persons who have been homeless for longer than one year.
- Rural homeless persons have a slightly higher unemployment rate and overwhelmingly cite "lack of affordable places to live" as their reason for being homeless.

Conclusion

While homeless counts may not tell us exactly how many homeless persons there are in California, these counts provide a reliable snapshot of the demographics of homeless persons in the state. No sub-population or region is beyond the reach of homelessness. In spite of having the highest number of homeless persons, the state of California does not conduct any annual homeless counts or analysis. California can do a better job in gathering and analyzing this data and working to ensure that California receives its share of federal funds, so we can focus on solutions.

More About the Data

California has 42 identified networks (called "continuums of care") that participate in local, homeless-assistance program planning and conduct homeless counts. Housing California contacted all 42 continuums of care; thirty-six responded with their homeless count data from January 2009. Data on the number of homeless children in 2008–09 school year was obtained from the California Department of Education.

It's important to note that some continuums obtain and publicize more-specific data than others in order to better inform their local planning processes. Some communities also conduct their sampling differently; for example, some survey only their sheltered populations, while others survey both their sheltered and unsheltered populations. Therefore, some data was limited by smaller sample sizes.

More About Annual Homeless Counts

Why Do Communities Conduct Homeless Counts?

Homeless counts are performed by applicants (called "continuum of care") as one of the requirements to apply for the largest federal resource for homelessness: the competitive McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grant Program. Continuum of care usually cover a city or county geographic region, though in some cases, several adjoining counties join together to submit one application. The purpose of a "point-in-time" homeless count is to use the snapshot the count provides to help communities determine the demand for homeless services in the coming year. To be eligible for McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grant funding (which is administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development), continuum of care must complete their counts at least once every two years.

How Are "Point-in-Time" Homeless Counts Conducted?

Point-in-time homeless counts are conducted in one 24-hour period (during the last week of January) and capture a tally only for that given night. This tally provides a snapshot of those who are experiencing homelessness throughout the year. Point-in-time counts provide a statistically reliable, unduplicated count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals and families in each continuum of care's geographical area; however, for a number of reasons, the numbers always represent an "undercount" of the true number of homeless persons.

Why Do Point-in-Time Counts Result in an "Undercount" of the Number of Homeless Persons?

There are two main reasons why point-in-time counts do not result in an accurate tally of how many homeless persons live within a given region:

- Point-in-time counts include only persons who fit within the narrow definition of "homelessness" as defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD's definition states that a person is homeless if he/she lives on the streets, in a place not meant for human habitation, or in an emergency shelter or "transitional" housing. HUD's definition does not take into account individuals or families who move from place to place ("couch surfers"), live doubled up with one or more other families, or live in motels, even though these persons consume comparable amounts of public services because of their limited incomes or disabilities. Each day, homeless service providers serve thousands of individuals and families who do not have a permanent residence but are not captured in these point-in-time counts.
- Because point-in-time counts are conducted in a single 24-hour period, it is not possible to reach every homeless person, which results in an undercount.

For a list of Top 10 Solutions to Reduce Homelessness in 2010, more-detailed homeless solutions for specific sub-populations (including families, people living in rural areas, California's youth, veterans, and persons with mental illness), and California's 2009 Homeless Count Summary, visit www.housingca.org/nr/resource/reports.