

The Oregonian

Portland's homeless population jumps nearly 10 percent, new count shows

By Molly Harbarger

June 19, 2017

The homeless population in Multnomah County increased nearly 10 percent in the last two years: There are now at least 4,177 people without permanent homes on any given night in Portland, the latest survey shows.

Homeless advocates and city and county leaders have warned that, despite more money and attention to the problem, the housing crisis is still forcing many people onto the streets.

But some officials see signs of hope, pointing to more people sleeping in shelters or transitional housing than outside for the first time since 2005.

"We all need to work together to help people out of poverty and homelessness," Multnomah County Chairwoman Deborah Kafoury said in a statement. "Too many people are sleeping on our streets. But by investing in housing and wraparound services, we are making a difference in the lives of thousands of people every year."

Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler said the results of the additional money invested last year and the pooling of city and county resources into the Joint Office of Homeless Services are showing.

"The challenges around homelessness are serious and varied," Wheeler said in a statement. "This report provides reason for optimism that our strategy is working."

The point-in-time count is a federal survey that must be done every two years. It's designed to gauge the effectiveness of a community's strategies to help homeless populations.

The anonymous survey doesn't answer why someone lives on the streets, but builds demographic trends tracking who's being displaced. It also likely undercounts homeless people because of the transient nature of the population and because it happens in winter, when many people try to find somewhere indoors to sleep. People also voluntarily participate, and some refuse or can't answer questions.

This year, January snowstorms and cold delayed the survey. Over a few days in February, outreach workers and county staff combed Portland, Gresham and the county fringes surveying homeless people in camps, vans and shelters. From 2017 on, the count will be conducted every year in Multnomah County.

The full county report on the results will be released in July. Portland State University, which the county hired to analyze the results, is still working on it.

The findings so far:

-- While the number of people without permanent housing increased from 2015 to 2017, fewer people are actually sleeping on the street – 1,668 -- a 12 percent drop. That's a level not seen since 2009.

Analysts attribute that to the city and county's focus on specific groups for priority in shelters, with reductions in the number of women, veterans and people of color sleeping on the street.

The survey showed a 31 percent increase in people staying in emergency shelters and transitional housing.

"The decline in the count of unsheltered individuals, despite ongoing challenges such as rapidly increasing housing costs and stagnant incomes for low-income households, likely reflects our community's significant expansion of prevention, housing placement, and emergency shelter capacity over the past two years," the report says.

-- Portland's overall numbers parallel those in cities with similar housing trends (rising rents, lack of low-income or affordable housing, low vacancy rates) and social service disparities (lack of employment opportunities, affordable health, mental health and addiction care).

In the time between the 2015 and 2017 count, Portland rent rose 20 times faster than the area's median income, now at \$1,100 for a one-bedroom apartment. Federal disability and Social Security payments haven't kept pace with the cost of living increases.

King County and Seattle saw a 16 percent increase over 2015 in people without permanent housing. Los Angeles County showed a 30 percent increase and farther north in Oakland in Alameda County, the homeless population increased by 39 percent.

-- Portland's efforts to shelter more people also show up in smaller demographic niches. For instance, while the number of homeless adult women increased 16 percent from 2015, fewer are on the streets. The number of women in emergency shelter doubled -- which officials say is a sign that the Joint Office for Homeless Service's goal of getting more women into shelters is helping.

Half of women experiencing homelessness have been in domestic violence situations. The county didn't get good data on that question in 2017, so there isn't a comparison, but it tracks with national statistics.

Families also used shelters at a much higher rate than 2015, though the number of homeless families is basically the same. The county won't turn away any family with children that asks for shelter.

Chronically homeless people also showed up in shelters more than ever before, despite the total population rising by 24 percent total.

-- One of the fastest-growing demographics is people with physical or mental disabilities or those with substance abuse issues. From 2015, the number jumped 16 percent of all homeless people to make up more than 60 percent. For people living on the street and veterans, the number reached up to nearly 72 percent.

-- People of color also continue to be one of the largest segments of the homeless population. While they make up more than 40 percent of the total homeless population, people of color represent 29 percent of Multnomah County's residents.

That's taking a toll on some communities, according to the report. Native Americans experience homelessness at four times the percentage of the Native American population in Multnomah County.

African Americans and Asian Americans also are disproportionately homeless. Both groups are homeless at rates twice their population in Multnomah County. However, the city and county prioritized helping African American people after the 2015 count and reduced their homelessness by eight percentage points.

Making sense of Portland's growing homelessness crisis

(Guest opinion)

*By Guest Columnist George Devendorf
June 19, 2017*

One of Portland's worst kept secrets was confirmed today when government officials announced what seemingly everyone already knew: homelessness is on the rise in Portland. According to the latest census count conducted in February, the number of people experiencing homelessness in our community jumped by 10 percent during the past two years. While few Portlanders will be surprised by this news, it's worth keeping a few things in mind as we prepare for the work ahead.

First, we are not alone. Though in recent years homelessness has been on the wane nationally, it's been increasing along the West Coast. From Seattle down the Interstate 5 corridor through Portland to San Francisco and Los Angeles, numbers are up. Los Angeles alone saw an increase of 23 percent over the past year. How do we make sense of this? While there are several explanations, it's hard to ignore an obvious link between these metro areas: sharply rising housing costs.

Second, though our numbers are up, Portland is actually making remarkable progress. In the past year alone, we became the first West Coast city to functionally end homelessness among veterans (though we still have work to do to sustain this achievement). Overall, we more than doubled the number of publicly-funded shelter beds available to people sleeping outside. We helped more than 4,600 people regain housing. And, we passed a \$258 million bond measure dedicated to building and preserving affordable housing - a first for the City of Portland. Absent these and other efforts being coordinated by our city/county Joint Office of Homeless Services, the results announced today would be considerably more dire.

Third, we know what works. Once someone becomes homeless, we know that the surest way to end their homelessness is to help get them back into housing. Sounds simple enough, but in a red-hot housing market like ours, that process can sometimes take months - even years. For many, having access to a shelter bed can provide a safe, stable place to sleep while they try to find new housing. Yet while more shelter beds are needed in Portland, we have to ensure we're not just investing in more shelter, but in more shelter success. As Portland's largest provider of shelter services, Transition Projects has demonstrated that shelter is most successful when it's paired with rent assistance and other services necessary to help people truly end their homelessness. So as we try to make sense of the latest census data, let's not lose sight of the importance of providing a holistic approach so that people are not simply left to languish in new shelters.

Finally, the drivers of our homelessness crisis are rooted in poverty. When wages fail to keep pace with the cost of living, low-income people lose their housing. When health insurance coverage becomes unaffordable, low-income people are driven toward bankruptcy. And when government investment in affordable housing continues to limp along at a fraction of what it was 30 years ago, low-income people - including those working full-time jobs - find themselves pushed to the margins, unable to afford a home in Portland.

The stakes have rarely been higher with political leaders in Washington D.C. referring to poverty as a "state of mind," while proposing drastic cuts to health, housing and food assistance programs. So in the coming year, we'll need to tackle our homelessness crisis on at least two fronts: By continuing to help today's homeless through a smart balance of rent assistance and

shelter, and by defending the kind of assistance programs for low-income families that help ensure they don't end up as statistics in next year's census count.

George Devendorf is executive director of [Transition Projects](#), a Portland area non-profit dedicated to helping people transition from homelessness to housing.

The Portland Tribune

City Hall Update: Mayor takes away problem-plagued 911 center from Fritz

By Jim Redden

June 20, 2017

Mayor Ted Wheeler took the Bureau of Emergency Communications from Commissioner Amanda Fritz when he reassigned agencies to the members of the City Council on Friday.

The switch was not completely unexpected. Two weeks ago, the city ombudsman accused BOEC of underestimating hold times at the 911 center it oversees for many years. Fritz had been in charge of it for much of that time, along with former Commissioner Steve Novick.

After the ombudsman's report was released, the council voted to study 911 response times. BOEC has been chronically understaffed for years and likely will need additional employees to meet its goal of answering 90 percent of 911 calls within 20 seconds. The report found the average response time is now 23 seconds, not 1 second as BEOC had been reporting.

Other major assignments remained the same as when Wheeler took all bureaus at the beginning of this year's budget process.

Police protest tactics questioned

In a June 13 letter to Portland Police Chief Mike Marshman, Mayor Ted Wheeler asked questions about a number of tactical decisions police made in response to competing protests in downtown Portland on June 4.

Wheeler said he generally was pleased the protests ended without anyone getting hurt or any property being damaged. But he also asked why police moved so-called anti-fascist protesters out of Chapman Park in the afternoon. And he wants to know the legal justification for corralling many of them as they marched down Southwest Fourth Avenue. The protesters and a number of reporters with them were detained until they were photographed with identification.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon has criticized the tactics as unconstitutional. Wheeler has asked Marshman to reply by Friday, June 23.

City officials consider downtown subway

Portland transportation planners broached the idea of a subway running under downtown and across the Willamette River to the Portland Planning and Sustainability Commission last Tuesday.

The concept, shown on a map with few details, is not an actual proposal and has no cost estimate. But it is being considered because TriMet MAX and bus service through downtown is so slow, currently stopping every few blocks to exchange riders and delaying trips between outlying cities.

Federal funding would be required for such an ambitious project, and that is becoming increasingly uncertain because President Donald Trump and Congress have not agreed on an infrastructure funding program for future years.

Willamette Week

Multnomah County Homeless Numbers Rise by 10 Percent, But More People Are in Shelters

*By Rachel Monahan
June 19, 2017*

The number of people sleeping on the streets in Multnomah County has fallen by 12 percent in the last two years, according to data released today.

The county's point-in-time homeless count, which was last conducted two years ago, shows the number of people officially considered homeless in the county increased by 9.9 percent since 2015. But the number of people living in homeless shelters doubled.

The decline in people on the streets is good news, but it's a limited victory. People are still struggling to find a place to live as rents rise and household incomes haven't kept pace.

"Like communities up and down the West Coast with rapidly rising rents and stagnant incomes for our lowest-income residents, this year's count shows, once again, that thousands of our neighbors experience homelessness on any given night," said Marc Jolin, director of A Home for Everyone and the Joint Office of Homeless Services, in a statement.

"But the data also shows us that our local interventions matter," Jolin continues. "By investing in prevention, housing placement and shelter, we brought the overall unsheltered number down, and ensured that thousands of people who otherwise might have been unsheltered on the night of the count were instead in emergency shelter or in permanent housing."

The drop in people living on the street comes after the county and the city invested an additional \$20 million in homeless services in 2016. It may come as a surprise to many in Portland, where there's been a sense of increasing crisis.

In its press release announcing the numbers, the Joint Office of Homeless Services tried to explain that disconnect as a result of greater visibility.

Tent camping has grown over the last year and a half. Some shelters, while more plentiful, still kick people out during the day.

But also the demographics of who's on the streets may make them more visible.

The percentage of people on the streets who report being chronically homeless—that is, who have been on the streets for upwards of two years—has risen.

So too has the percentage of people outside who report having a disability, a category that includes "a mental disability, chronic physical condition, and/or a substance-use disorder," according to the memo written by Jolin.

The full point-in-time report has not been released, so there's no data yet on the geography of where people are living.

Mayor Ted Wheeler, who took office less than two months before this count was taken, pledged as part of his campaign to find a shelter bed for everyone living on the streets of Portland.

But it may prove challenging. The dramatic investment that the city and county made last year before he took office resulted in a 12 percent decline in the number of people on the streets. To bring that number to zero would require dramatic changes.

But Wheeler originally proposed [a budget](#) that would have decreased the amount of money for the joint office, and potentially eliminated shelter beds. He has since increased that budget slightly, but it's not clear how he can make good on his campaign pledge without a massive investment.

"We are going to do everything we can to expand shelter space in the the coming year," says the mayor's spokesman, Michael Cox, adding that the city hopes to rely on private partnerships to increase the number of beds.

The Portland Mercury

Portland's Homeless Population Is Up 10 Percent, but Fewer People Are Unsheltered

By Dirk VanderHart

June 19, 2017

In 2015, city and county officials made a bold claim. With unprecedented and continued funding toward the right resources—permanent housing, shelter, and preventing people from falling into homelessness in the first place—they said the city could [slash its homeless population in half by 2017](#).

They were wrong.

Despite record amounts of spending and thousands upon thousands of people served, the still-unfolding housing crisis has led to a roughly 10 percent increase in the homeless population in the last two years, from 3,801 in 2015 to 4,177 this year.

At the same time—and amid ever-more visible encampments throughout town—officials say their plans have paid off in a meaningful way: The number of unsheltered homeless people in the city has decreased by nearly 12 percent.

The 1,668 individuals accounted for as part of a single-night count in late February is the lowest number of people found in tents, cars, abandoned buildings, and other unsheltered living situations in the last 8 years. It would be lower still if federal rules allowed officials to omit the people living in sanctioned organized encampments like Right 2 Dream Too, Hazelnut Grove, and Dignity Village.

The number of people in shelter the night of the count doubled, not surprising given the huge number of beds officials have created.

The long-awaited data was released Monday afternoon, when the city/county Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS) unveiled preliminary findings from an every-other-year "point-in-time" homelessness count carried out earlier in the year. The count—by its nature imperfect and under-representative—combines computer system data about people staying in homeless shelters with findings from an army of volunteers [who fan out to survey people](#) living without shelter throughout Multnomah County.

The picture the findings paint is equal parts dispiriting and hopeful. On one hand, it shows that the most comprehensive and data driven approach to reducing homelessness in the city's history hasn't been able to fulfill its promise. People are simply falling into homelessness at too great a rate, officials say, to stem the tide as they'd hoped in 2015.

"Part of that model assumed the rate at which people were coming homeless would stay the same," says Denis Theriault, a spokesperson for the JOHS (and former Mercury employee). "Very clearly that did not stay the same. The inflow has apparently gone up, gotten worse. Housing has gotten more expensive. That impacts everything our service providers do."

Even homeless veterans—a population for whom officials [claimed to have "functionally ended"](#) veterans' homelessness for late last year—were up from 2015. The data showed 446 self-identified homeless vets, compared to 422 two years before (though changes in methodology prevent a precise apples-to-apples comparison).

The number of homeless women, people with disabilities, and chronically homeless individuals have all increased.

But the data also shows that the Portland region's efforts—and the tens of millions in public dollars put toward this problem—have helped a lot of people. Officials are heartened that the count shows an 11.6 percent decrease in unsheltered Portlanders, marking the first time since Portland began counting in this manner that there were more people in emergency shelter than living on the streets.

That's possible because the city and county have increased shelter beds by roughly 630 since January 2016, creating more space for homeless families, women, people with pets, and others. They're also placing record numbers of people in permanent housing—more than 3,500 from July to March alone—and helping thousands more avoid homelessness through prevention services like rent assistance (which stretches less far than it used to, what with the city's rising rents).

"The decline in the count of unsheltered individuals, despite ongoing challenges such as rapidly increasing housing costs and stagnant incomes for low-income households, likely reflects our community's significant expansion of prevention, housing placement, and emergency shelter capacity over the past two years," reads a memo by JOHS Director Marc Jolin on the findings.

Some other takeaways from the study:

- The number of homeless families, a point of concern in the 2015 count, remained roughly the same this year, but many more were sheltered this time around. The county saw a nearly 50 percent decrease in unsheltered families.
- The number of chronically homeless Portlanders has increased by 24 percent. The vast majority of those people, 71 percent, are unsheltered.

- There are fewer African Americans experiencing homelessness—positive news for another group that [generated particular concern in 2015](#). This year's count found 187 fewer Black people, including a 57 percent reduction in those without shelter.
- The number of Native Americans who are homeless ballooned—from 82 in 2015 to 424 in 2017. Officials chock that up to an "unexplained issue" in the 2015 count they believe resulted in the Native American population being undercounted. People of color as a whole are overrepresented in Portland's homeless population, but Native Americans see a particularly stark disparity. Their rate of homelessness is roughly four times their percentage of the population.
- The number of homeless women also increased, from 1,161 in 2015 to 1,355 this year. Again, though, the number of homeless women without shelter had decreased.
- Fewer people reported being homeless for a short period of time, and more reported being homeless for a long period of time. Of people responding to a survey given to unsheltered Portlanders, 36 percent said they'd been homeless for less than a year, compared to 41 percent in 2015. In addition, 32 percent of people said they'd been homeless for two years or more, compared to 23 percent in 2015. "It's harder to get people into housing," Theriault says.

The data comes as Portland is once again planning to spend record amounts of money on addressing homelessness. Between them, the Multnomah County and the City of Portland have budgeted more than \$50 million in the next year for the Joint Office of Homeless Services, to continue its work of placing people into housing, preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place, and providing emergency shelter.

But the homelessness data also points yet another bold arrow toward the severity of the city's housing crisis, showing the city needs solutions that help people from falling into homelessness. As [we reported this week](#), the state legislature is considering a proposal that would provide for new tenant protections. But that legislation, House Bill 2004, has already been watered down due to concerns from some legislators, and it might have to be weakened further to earn the crucial vote of one skeptic, East Portland-based Senator Rod Monroe.

[Here's](#) the full data, shared in a memo from Jolin to the executive committee of A Home For Everyone, the community-wide task force that strategizes on fighting homelessness. Jolin is scheduled to lay out the findings at a meeting Monday afternoon.