

## Nation taking a new look at homelessness, solutions

By Martin Kasindorf, USA TODAY    Posted 10/11/2005, Updated 10/12/2005

Months before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck, volunteer searchers found 6,251 homeless people living in the coastal areas of Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi and Alabama. The search was part of an unprecedented count of the nation's homeless population that the federal government asked cities and counties to conduct.



The Sweeney family rests at a hotel in Marshall, Mo.

That snapshot tally was 727,304 homeless people nationwide, meaning about one in 400 Americans were without a home, according to a USA TODAY survey of all 460 localities that reported results to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in June. **(Related story: [Search produces wealth of data](#))**

HUD will need six months to add up the local reports, and the agency isn't planning to announce the total because counting methods weren't uniform, spokesman Brian Sullivan says. Whatever flaws the count may have, it is the most ambitious attempt ever to measure the scope of homelessness in the nation.

Earlier estimates were based on statistical sampling techniques. A 2000 study by the Urban Institute estimated 444,000 to 842,000 homeless people.

The national figure for homelessness obtained in the USA TODAY survey was no surprise to those who study the issue. It "absolutely matches up with the (previous) research," says Philip Mangano, executive director of the White House's Interagency Council on Homelessness. "That is certainly well within the range that the researchers have indicated over the last several years."

As significant as the tally is, Katrina and Rita multiplied homelessness along the Gulf Coast as much as a hundredfold and almost doubled the national ranks. R. David Paulison, acting director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), told a Senate committee last week that 400,000 to 600,000 displaced households in Louisiana and Mississippi alone will "need to find long-term housing."

Even before the hurricanes, the White House was targeting homelessness for experiments in "compassionate conservatism" that focus on housing single adults. The Bush administration's \$4 billion budget request for next year for all federal programs dealing with homelessness is a record amount.

Recent images of families displaced by the hurricanes are giving the issue of being homeless greater prominence. Activist groups such as the Washington, D.C.-based National Alliance to End Homelessness express hope that sympathy for hurricane victims will spill over into new policies and funding to help everyone without a home.

The government's reaction to help Katrina victims puts them in line for more than \$23 billion in housing aid from FEMA. Homeowners will get most of the cash for rebuilding. FEMA plans to house thousands temporarily in trailers, motels, government-owned housing and military bases.

President Bush says Hurricane Rita's victims will get similar assistance.

"The storm victims never, ever thought they would be homeless," Mangano says. "So you never know what might be the event that catapults you into homelessness. And that's why there's this tremendous amount of sympathy for these families."

### **New solutions from Katrina**

The administration expects quick results from the hurricane relief money. Mangano predicts that about 23,000 Katrina evacuees will still be without a home a year from now. If that estimate holds, Hurricane Katrina ultimately will add about 3% to the nation's total of homeless.

Are those who were homeless before the hurricanes going to be overlooked? Not if the public outpouring of aid to help those along the Gulf Coast can be translated into long-term policies that help everyone without a home.

"Can we reach into the disaster and pull out something that will be helpful to historically homeless people? I think the answer to that is yes," says Mangano, who heads the office that coordinates 20 federal agencies to reduce or end homelessness.

Dennis Culhane, a University of Pennsylvania sociologist who studies homelessness, says that a new federal policy for people displaced by Hurricane Katrina could be extended to thousands of other homeless families. FEMA is offering cash advances of \$2,358 to cover three months' rent anywhere in the nation for hurricane survivors. If they don't readily find permanent housing, the government help could be stretched to 18 months.

Short-term rental vouchers are "something homelessness activists have been calling for, for a long time," Culhane says. "Emergency rental assistance would help the vast majority of people avoid homelessness altogether."

Bigger fixes may depend on the success of efforts to get storm victims back into permanent homes. "I have hope that if we do things effectively — which is a big if — that will show that you can re-house people fast, even if they have a lot of complicated problems and are poor," says Nan Roman, president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

### **STATE-BY-STATE COUNT**

The number of homeless people counted earlier this year in each state and the District of Columbia compared with each state's rank by overall population.

<b>Rank</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Pop. rank</b>	<b>Homeless</b>
1.	Calif.	1	195,637
2.	Fla.	4	68,369
3.	N.Y.	3	59,456
4.	Texas	2	39,578
5.	Mich.	8	26,179
6.	Colo.	22	21,730
7.	Wash.	15	17,590
8.	Ill.	5	16,904
9.	Ohio	7	16,165
10.	Ore.	27	15,929
11.	N.J.	10	15,778
12.	Pa.	6	15,112
13.	Mass.	13	14,896
14.	Ga.	9	12,384
15.	N.C.	11	11,065
16.	Va.	12	10,328
17.	Ind.	14	9,670
18.	Nev.	35	9,310
19.	Md.	19	9,048
20.	Mo.	17	8,902

21.	Iowa	30	8,373
22.	Tenn.	16	8,144
23.	Ariz.	18	7,904
24.	R.I.	43	7,814
25.	Minn.	21	7,068
26.	Wis.	20	6,900
27.	S.C.	25	6,481
28.	D.C.	50	6,026
29.	Hawaii	42	5,935
30.	Ark.	32	5,914
31.	Kan.	33	5,513
32.	La.	24	5,504
33.	Conn.	29	5,359
34.	N.M.	36	5,256
35.	Ala.	23	5,047
36.	Okla.	28	4,784
37.	Ky.	26	4,623
38.	Neb.	38	3,268
39.	N.H.	41	3,233
40.	Utah	34	2,738
41.	Alaska	47	2,382
42.	Maine	40	2,304
43.	W.Va.	37	1,665
44.	Miss.	31	1,546
45.	Mont.	44	1,343
46.	Del.	45	1,108
47.	S.D.	46	1,029
48.	Vt.	49	927
49.	N.D.	48	655
50.	Idaho	39	608
51.	Wyo.	51	487
<b>Total</b>			<b>723,968</b>

### Life on the edge

It didn't take the back-to-back Gulf Coast hurricanes to show that life can be precarious for the homeless. In a July heat wave, 14 homeless people died in Phoenix. In Los Angeles in August, two 19-year-old men were arrested on charges of attacking two homeless men with baseball bats. Many cities are cracking down on the street homeless. Santa Monica, Calif., reduced food giveaways in city parks because of complaints they attracted more homeless people. Nearly 30% of U.S. cities ban begging, says the National Coalition for the Homeless, a group based in Washington.

Many city and county officials are beginning to conclude that homelessness is a solvable problem, not an intractable social ill. Cities from Philadelphia to San Francisco show decreasing numbers of homeless people, in part because of a federal policy that concentrates on housing homeless adults who are the most visible to the public.

The president set a goal in a 2002 directive of ending chronic homelessness by 2012. HUD offers bonus money to cities that focus on the chronically homeless — adults who live for years in doorways or shelters. In response, more than 200 cities have adopted 10-year plans to end chronic homelessness.

HUD defines a chronically homeless person as "an unaccompanied individual with a disabling condition" who has been continuously homeless for a year or more, or has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.

The USA TODAY analysis of the count done for HUD showed that these hardest-to-help men and women make up 25% of the homeless, surpassing previous estimates of 10%-15%. Families with children make up 42% of the total, according to the analysis.

The Bush directive boosted a concept called Housing First, pioneered in New York City and Los Angeles about five years ago. It abandons the traditional cycle of moving those who are down-and-out from the street to a shelter to a detox center to jail to a psychiatric ward, then back to the street.

Instead, people are guided into apartments with on-site counseling for mental health problems and substance addictions. Staffers ensure that residents take prescribed medications and show up for job training.

The plan in a nutshell: The cure for homelessness is a home.

"Don't give them just a blanket and a bowl of soup," Mangano says. "Give them housing and services, and eventually that person goes out and gets a job."

## LARGEST POPULATIONS

Locations reporting the largest homeless populations:

Rank	Location	Homeless
1.	Los Angeles County	88,345
2.	New York City	48,155
3.	Orange County, Calif.	22,784
4.	Detroit	14,827
5.	Houston	14,000
6.	Tampa/Hillsborough County	11,023
7.	Denver metro area	10,157
8.	San Diego County	8,789
9.	Santa Clara County (San Jose), Calif.	7,646
10.	Seattle	7,315
11.	Contra Costa County, Calif.	7,092
12.	Atlanta	6,832
13.	Chicago	6,680
14.	Philadelphia	6,653
15.	Washington, D.C.	6,026
16.	Dallas	5,898
17.	Boston	5,819
18.	San Francisco	5,404
19.	Des Moines	5,331
20.	Fort Worth	5,278
21.	Miami-Dade County	5,160
22.	Alameda County (Oakland), Calif.	5,129
23.	Las Vegas	5,106
24.	Portland, Ore.	5,104
25.	Punta Gorda/Charlotte County, Fla.	4,783

Source: USA TODAY analysis of numbers reported to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development by cities and counties

## Success stories

Cities that rely on Housing First include New York, Philadelphia, Miami, Hartford, Conn., and Portland, Ore. Success stories:

- San Francisco counted 8,640 homeless people citywide in 2002. This year, the count was 5,404, a 37% drop. The downtown street-homeless population, a turnoff for tourists, declined 41%. Mayor Gavin Newsom credits efforts to move longtime street dwellers into special housing.

"We have more than 1,000 people who were on the streets housed in dozens of residential hotels, not slumlord hotels," he says. "Rooms have doors, keys, locks, bathtubs and cable hookups. There is a 24-hour case management desk. There are roving behavioral-health teams."

- In New York City, the number of people in shelters has dropped to 32,000 from 39,000 in March 2004, says Linda Gibbs, city commissioner of homeless services. That's in part because more

than 3,500 Housing First units with social services have been built or are under construction. Mayor Michael Bloomberg has called for 12,000 units in all.

- Philadelphia has moved 120 of "the highest users of our system" into apartments with special services, says Rob Hess, a city housing official. It's one factor in a drastic reduction of the number of people living on downtown streets to fewer than 100 last winter compared with 824 five years ago.

The hurricanes showed a different face of homelessness: families who suddenly lost everything. The storms could pressure HUD to expand its definition of the chronically homeless to include families who lose their housing for long periods.

### **Fastest-growing group**

Families with children are the fastest-growing segment of the homeless, says Christine Riddle, director of the Michigan Coalition for the Homeless. "In a low-wage, service economy with manufacturing declining and rents soaring, people can't afford housing," she says.

On Fifth Street in downtown Los Angeles, "it was rare to see a woman on Skid Row five years ago," says Mitchell Netburn, executive director of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority.

"Now it's common to see a long row of children getting on school buses" there, he says.

Rita Markley, executive director of the Committee on Temporary Shelter in Burlington, Vt., says Bush's emphasis on helping single men and women has shortchanged families. She acknowledges that single adults who are homeless — often disheveled and carrying their possessions in a shopping cart — are more visible and prompt public demands that politicians do something.

"It's disturbing to see somebody mentally ill wandering the streets. You don't know you're standing in line behind a homeless family at the grocery store," she says.

Destitute families often run into bureaucratic walls.

"HUD will not pay for permanent housing for families who are just poor," says David Raymond, the top homelessness official in Miami-Dade County.

"They need to have a disability like mental illness, substance abuse, HIV. So we use \$10 million a year of our own 1% beverage sales-tax money to fund things HUD won't."

Mangano defends the administration's focus on helping single men and women with disabling conditions. They are "the most vulnerable, most likely to live on the street and most likely to die on the street," he says.

Mangano is optimistic that the outpouring of compassion for hurricane survivors will benefit other homeless Americans.

"The heart of this country is now open as it never has been before," he says, "and there's an opportunity that the heart will remain open for all homeless persons."

*Contributing: Justin Dickerson*

## **Search produces a wealth of data despite some holes in the canvass**

By Martin Kasindorf, USA TODAY    Posted 10/11/2005

Two searchers kayaked down California's Napa River to scope out hidden encampments. Elsewhere in Napa County, the homeless and hungry were invited to a county-sponsored chicken barbecue where they could be counted.

City-paid decoys dressed in ragged clothes sprawled on Manhattan steam grates, waiting to see whether volunteers stopped to interview them.

Los Angeles County spent \$72,000 to hire 629 homeless people at \$10 an hour to ferret out their brethren in alleys and oceanfront parks.

For cities and counties that took a special census of their homeless populations this year, creative techniques promised big payoffs. At stake was their share of a \$1.6 billion pot of federal money next year.

### **A 'street count' this year**

In 2003, U.S. housing officials who award assistance grants for homelessness started requiring a yearly count of people in shelters. This year the government went further, calling for a "street count" of people living under bridges, in parks or in cars, alleys and subways.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development wasn't satisfied with earlier estimates and ordered the most exhaustive tally of actual homeless people ever done. HUD will use the nationwide total as "a baseline, a tool to gauge the effectiveness of local programs," spokesman Brian Sullivan says.

Street counts will be repeated every two years.

HUD hasn't released the final tally, but USA TODAY contacted the 460 cities and counties that participated in the count and tabulated the results. The nationwide total of 727,304 was within the range of previous estimates, says sociologist Martha Burt of the Urban Institute.

A USA TODAY analysis of the count shows:

- Even the most affluent or booming places have homeless people. The survey found 336 in Palm Springs, Calif. In Massachusetts, Nantucket Island, Martha's Vineyard and Cape Cod had a combined total of 1,228. Las Vegas counted 5,106 — plus 7,092 "sofa surfers" staying with relatives or friends. HUD doesn't count as homeless those doubled-up with others, or families crowded into motel rooms.
- Shelters don't have room for everybody on cold winter nights, and not everyone is willing to go. Anchorage found 30 people sleeping on the street in January. In Flint, Mich., 86% of those counted were unsheltered. As expected, cities with warmer climates had a high percentage of homeless on the streets: 88% in Los Angeles County and 56% in Honolulu.
- In New York City's subway cars and stations, 835 people were curled up for the night, accounting for 19% of the city's street homeless and 2% of the city's total homeless.
- In some cities, many homeless people work daily jobs that don't pay enough to cover housing costs. That's the case for 36% in Tallahassee, Fla., and 40% of those in shelters in Buffalo.

The national count was not exact. Some rural areas didn't participate. "The cops say, 'We don't have any,' " says Sandy Miller, an AmeriCorps-VISTA volunteer in Palestine, Texas. "There are no transient homeless because they send them somewhere else."

### **Methods varied**

And survey methods varied widely. HUD allowed some statistical sampling. New York City, Houston and other places used sampling to supplement the actual count.

Street counts present a host of problems. They need a lot of volunteers and can be dangerous. "We don't really put a ton of effort into it, because it's hard to do," says Grace Carmark of the Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance in Worcester.

"A lot of homeless people don't want to be counted," says Mark Spiker, an homelessness activist in Lakeland, Fla. "When we walk into an area, they kind of evaporate."

Homeless families "generally try to hide," says Victor Hudanko, a Mesa, Ariz., consultant to local governments. "Parents are afraid that their children might be taken away because they're sleeping in a car." Those fears are unjustified because the law requires "specific abuse" to find child neglect, he says.