

# Homeless in the US: Underfunded and brutalized

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19 March 2007

While statistics do not capture the real social dimension of homelessness in the United States, new data confirm that the homeless face increasing brutality, criminalization and neglect. But like the growing poverty population, the suffering of the homeless population finds no meaningful reflection in the budget or policy priorities of the federal government.

To the contrary, the political establishment, including Congress and the mainstream press, has consciously made a habit of ignoring the plight of the extremely poor while the social safety net is unraveled. The numbers do reveal some of the consequences of this negligence.

An estimated 754,147 people were homeless in the US in the winter of 2005, according to the first comprehensive survey by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) of homelessness.

On an average day between February and April 2005, 335,000 homeless persons slept in shelters. Additionally, on a single day in January 2005, 338,781 *unsheltered* homeless persons were reported to HUD by local agencies.

The numbers were provided by all Continuums of Care (CoCs), or agencies receiving HUD funds, based on one-night counts of the homeless populations in communities throughout the country, and aggregated by HUD's Homeless Management Information System.

This "point-in-time count" data provides an insight into the previously underexamined unsheltered population, although the report cautioned that it is difficult to accurately count those sleeping in abandoned buildings, subways, parks, and on the street. Even so, by the CoC count, approximately 45 percent of the homeless were surviving unsheltered in winter 2005.

HUD presented these figures to Congress in its first *Annual Homeless Assessment Report* in February, as the Bush administration unveiled its 2008 budget proposal. The president's budget proposes an 8 percent cut in funding for HUD emergency housing programs, including the Community Development Block Grant, public housing, and housing programs for the disabled and elderly.

HUD commented in its report, "In comparing these results with those of previous studies, there is no evidence that the size of the homeless population has changed dramatically over the past ten years. Given that the total US population grew by 31 million people since 1996, no increase in the homeless population could be deemed an accomplishment."

However, the report notes, the point-in-time method of data collection under-represents the population whose homelessness is episodic and those who experience single stints of homelessness. After taking these into account, "there were an estimated 704,000 *sheltered* homeless persons at some time during the three-month period from February to April 2005."

This three-month estimate is 70 percent higher than the single-day point-in-time count, indicating substantial turnover in the sheltered population. The discrepancy points to a significant understatement in homelessness. It also suggests great instability among the population considered "tenuously housed," including those dependent on government funded housing programs.

By comparison, there were 438,300 emergency and transitional housing beds in early 2005. The 217,900 beds in emergency shelters had utilization rates greater than 90 percent, according to CoC data.

In 1984, HUD estimated that there were 250,000 to 350,000 homeless persons in the US, with access to 100,000 beds. By 1988, 180,000 homeless persons were using emergency shelters each night, and beds numbered 275,000.

Two decades later, the number of shelter beds has decreased by more than 57,000, while the known homeless population has grown at least four times in size. HUD's count does not include the tenuously housed population, such as people staying in motels or sleeping on the floors of relatives' homes.

The causes of homelessness are myriad, but taken together, they depict the underside of the economy. Before seeking emergency shelter, homeless families in 2005 most frequently left their housing because they could not afford rent or were evicted by their landlords. Female-headed families also fled domestic violence or otherwise broken homes.

Ten percent of the unaccompanied homeless persons had stayed in a place not meant for human habitation, and 6 percent had stayed in a correctional facility the night before entering an emergency shelter.

Among the sheltered homeless counted in 2005, 47 percent were single adult men. The report points out that only 20 percent of the US poor population as a whole are adult men living alone. The female homeless population and those with children are more likely to double up with relatives, resulting in under-representation in the CoC shelter counts.

Approximately 59 percent of the sheltered homeless were members of minority groups. While 12 percent of the total US population is black, blacks account for 45 percent of the homeless population.

Nearly a quarter of the sheltered homeless were found to be under the age of 17. Children under the age of 6 make up about 11 percent of the sheltered homeless population, compared to 8 percent of the total US population.

Less than 2 percent of the homeless population are 62 years old or older, in part because of the social safety net available to the elderly, and in part because the harrowing conditions of homelessness result in a significantly shortened lifespan. A quarter of the homeless in shelters have a disabling condition, although much data was missing on this characteristic.

Veterans make up 18.7 percent of the sheltered and 21.3 percent of the unsheltered homeless adults included in the HMIS data.

As alarming as the new HUD point-in-time estimate is, longitudinal and other alternative estimates of the homeless population flowing through the nation's shelters are dramatically higher. HUD made reference to a number of other studies.

A study by the University of Pennsylvania documented the number of homeless in New York City and Philadelphia shelters over several years beginning in the early 1990s. In New York, the number of persons using shelters over a year was estimated to be 86,000; over three years, 162,000; and over a five-year period, 240,000.

HUD summarized, “One percent of the city’s population was estimated to be using public shelters over a one-year period compared to two percent over a three-year period and three percent over a five-year period.” The University of Pennsylvania study also found that in Philadelphia in 1992, for every individual in a shelter on a given night, more than six people used the shelter system at some time during the year.

Another study from the early 1990s, published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, estimated that 14 percent of the US population—about 26 million people—had been homeless at some point in their lifetimes, and that about 5 percent, or 8.5 million people, had experienced homelessness in the previous five years. The study was based on a national telephone survey of more than 1,500 housed adults.

Still another study, published in 2001 by the Urban Institute, estimated that the number of persons experiencing homelessness in the US during a one-year period was between 2.5 million and 3.5 million. This estimate was based on 1996 data from the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients, conducted by the Census Bureau.

All of the aforementioned research illustrates the magnitude of the crisis, yet all are woefully outdated for analyzing such a pressing social ailment as homelessness. In the past decade, the homeless population has been subjected to laws banning their presence in urban centers as well as a substantial increase in hate crimes.

The National Coalition for the Homeless released its annual examination of violent crimes against the homeless population last month. In 2006, violence surged to nearly double the previous year. The report, *Hate, Violence, and Death on Main Street USA*, found that 20 homeless persons were killed last year and 122 were survivors of attacks, overwhelmingly committed by teenagers, some as young as 13 years old. Most of the victims were unsheltered, middle-aged men. The NCH suggests that the incidence of violence was sharply higher than the number reported.

The accounts, taken from headlines and advocacy reports, are horrific. Assaults included rapes, beatings with rocks, baseball bats and other objects, and setting victims on fire. Attackers frequently explained their actions as motivated by boredom, for the “thrill” or “fun,” or simply because they “can”—an indictment in itself of a brutal society.

Crucially, the NCH states, “Research and experience have shown the correlation between homeless-directed violence and city efforts to criminalize homelessness. Laws that violate the basic civil rights of homeless people justify violence toward them. Through the creation of societies where homeless individuals are seen as second-class citizens, we are fueling the dehumanization of homeless people. It is the responsibility of cities and of all governing bodies to ensure that the criminalization of the homeless is neither fostered nor encouraged in America’s cities.”

Indeed, the relationship between municipal policies that restrict the presence of homeless people and the incidence of violence against the homeless has been correlated by the NCH and the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty. Criminalizing the lack or loss of property effectively dehumanizes the homeless and violates their civil rights, paving the way for the most savage abuse.

In light of the precarious situation confronting the nation’s poor, the Bush administration’s budget proposals are particularly cruel. HUD funding for the most vulnerable populations is seen as entirely optional. Indeed, in the past two years, \$3.3 billion has been cut from HUD affordable housing funds; the number of public housing units has dropped by 100,000 over the past decade.

According to *Without Housing*, a study released in late 2006 by the Western Regional Advocacy Project, HUD oversaw the construction of 755,000 public housing units between 1976 and 1982. Since 1983, only 256,000 new public housing units have been built. Moreover, between 1993 and 2003, 1.2 million unsubsidized affordable housing units have disappeared.

The proposed 2007 fiscal year budget allocates \$33.6 billion for housing

and homeless programs. HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson stated in a February 6 press release that “The President’s proposed budget is a real investment in building a society based on ownership and reaching out to those people and places in need to make sure every American has a place to call home.” Jackson gushed that the budget “places a premium on demonstrating results and allows HUD to sustain our core programs that are built on compassion while we continue to improve the way we serve communities around this country.”

What is meant by an “ownership society” is the rewarding of the propertied at the expense of the dispossessed. *Without Housing*, citing Congressional budget resolutions, documents that “Every year since 1981, tax benefits for homeownership have been greater than HUD’s entire budget and have dwarfed direct expenditures for programs that benefit low-income renters.”

Even within HUD’s budget, appropriations targeting the most vulnerable populations are eclipsed by the amount of funding devoted to middle- and higher-income households. In 2004, for example, “61 percent of all federal housing subsidies went to households earning over \$54,788, while only 27 percent of those subsidies went to households earning under \$34,398.” In 2005, federal homeowner subsidies totaled more than \$122 billion, while HUD affordable housing outlays totaled \$31 billion.

Meanwhile, the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), a program that provides housing in poor neighborhoods, is facing a 20 percent cut in the budget proposal compared to 2007 funding. This amounts to a \$735 million cut, to \$3.037 billion. This total amount represents less than two days in the annual budget of the Pentagon.

HUD’s elderly housing funds, Section 202, face a 22 percent reduction, from an already inadequate \$735 million to \$575 million. Section 811 disabled housing funds are targeted for a 47 percent cut, from \$237 million to a mere \$125 million. Homeless assistance, at \$1.442 billion in the current funding cycle, has never been more than \$1.5 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars since funds were first earmarked in 1987.



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