

Homelessness on the rise in Boston

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Boston released the results of its annual homelessness census on January 31. The results show a 3.3 percent increase in the number of homeless adult individuals (3,714 in 2013 vs. 3,597 the previous year), a 4.3 percent increase in the number of homeless children in the city, and a 5.8 percent increase in the number of homeless families.

While the population of individual homeless adults living on the streets decreased from 193 to 180, the number in emergency shelters increased by 10.5 percent to 1,511. The census was taken on the night of December 16, 2013.

For 30 years, Massachusetts law has stipulated a “right to shelter,” but homeless families are confronted by rising rents—the sixth highest in the nation, according to WBUR—inadequate government support, and a crisis of income inequality. Last week, Boston was called out in the Brookings Institution report “All Cities Are Not Created Equal.” Comparing the income of the 95th percentile to that of the 20th, the report found that Boston is one of the four most unequal cities in the country.

The top 5 percent of Boston’s residents make more than \$220,000 while the bottom 20 percent make less than \$15,000. Brookings also found that the income of the 20th percentile dropped by more than \$1,300 between 2007 and 2012, while WBUR reported in December that Massachusetts lost \$20 million of subsidized housing funds because of last year’s federal sequester.

Despite this crisis and its effect on families, Boston does have more resources for sheltering and helping homeless adults than many other areas of Massachusetts. Cities such as Lowell, Haverhill, Lynn, Salem, and New Bedford have never recovered from last century’s loss of manufacturing jobs and, more recently, income from fishing. In his press release announcing the results of the census, Mayor Martin

Walsh stated that “preliminary findings from the December count show that over a third of emergency shelter guests in Boston came from a community outside of the city.”

One of the most well-established homeless shelters in Boston is the Pine Street Inn, which has operated for 45 years. Its facilities include the main men’s and women’s shelters on Harrison Avenue, a veterans’ home in Dorchester, a shelter and men’s addiction treatment program in Jamaica Plain, a shelter on Long Island in Boston Harbor, and 36 permanent residences in greater Boston which provide housing at subsidized rates. Pine Street also provides some job training to those who are ready to re-enter the workforce, and does outreach to homeless individuals who do not want to come in from the streets.

Because it services only individual men and women, most of Pine Street’s clientele are homeless due to mental health and addiction issues. These individuals have suffered from this winter’s harsh weather, and there have been nights when more than 100 people slept in the lobby and other common areas.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Barbara Trevisan, Pine Street’s director of communications. She told the WSWWS that the number of homeless individuals without families had been going down for the last eight to ten years before this year’s increase.

“This is kind of a place of last resort for a lot of people,” Trevisan said. On the path to homelessness, Pine Street’s clients “start by staying with family, by couch surfing, so what we find is people who may have either their unemployment run out or they’ve lost their jobs, usually go through several stages until they get here.”

Of homeless migration into Boston she said, “We are finding that in different parts of the state where they may not have the same level of resources or services to offer, we definitely are seeing that.”

Compounding the problem is an increase in heroin overdoses statewide since November. On February 25 the *Boston Globe* reported 185 deaths statewide since November, not including those in Boston, Springfield, and Worcester. On February 22 the *Globe* speculated that the increase of overdoses on Cape Cod might be a result of the drug being cut with fentanyl. It quoted the executive director of the AIDS Support Group, who said that Cape Cod “goes from being a vacationland to being a pretty rural type area” in winter, leading to increased drug use.

Another change in the population of homeless individuals is “more younger men and women,” according to Pine Street’s Trevisan. Some, she felt, are teenagers who aged out of the foster care system at age 18 and “have been in flux for a lot of their lives and they don’t necessarily have the stability or the skills.” Others may come from working families at a time when “there seems to be less tolerance or less capacity for families to deal with young people who are troubled.”

Boston’s winter has been especially harsh this year, with frequent snowstorms and large temperature fluctuations. When interviewed, Trevisan said that “last night I was here for the dinner service, and I have never seen that many guys coming in for dinner. We served hundreds of dinners last night.”

When asked whether the state provides adequate funding for this population, Trevisan responded that the state has been flexible in letting Pine Street use shelter funding for programs specifically designed to get people into long term housing.

Nationally, she said, “there has been a real kind of reset of focus, on getting long-term people into housing. It used to be that you had to get clean and sober, you used to have to jump through all those hoops before you could get housing. And what they’re finding is there’s real results with housing first, or the initiative to get people off the street right into housing.” Pine Street says that it has close to a 90 percent retention rate in its long-term housing programs.

Residents of these programs sign a lease and are expected to pay 30 percent of their income in rent. Staff are available for counseling, with the understanding that addiction and mental illness are a lifelong struggle for people.

Pine Street’s kitchen does commercial catering, and has training programs in cooking and building

maintenance. Outside income from these “social enterprises” is used to pay trainees and run the programs.

Asked about the number of veterans among the homeless whom Pine Street serves, Trevisan responded that some of their clients are Vietnam vets who still struggle with mental illness. Pine Street has run a veterans’ home in Dorchester and a veterans’ drop-in center in Roxbury for the last two or three years.

Estimates of the percentage of vets among the homeless range from 25 percent to 33 percent nationally. Despite a government promise last year to find housing for 100 homeless vets in 100 days, estimates still put their number at around 450 in Boston.



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