

# Washington, DC homelessness rises to record levels

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Washington, DC's homeless population reached record levels this winter for a second year in a row. Although official statistics on this year's rise in homelessness will not be available until the end of "hypothermia season" in April, the number of families requiring shelter has already surpassed official expectations.

District administrators and politicians had anticipated that family homelessness would increase by 16 percent this year, but this projected figure has already been surpassed. It follows on the heels of a 25 percent increase during the winter of 2013-2014.

Homelessness has become endemic throughout the Washington, DC, metropolitan region. Last year, just over 700 families sought shelter during the winter months, and it was estimated that the total would rise to around 840 families this winter before freezing temperatures begin to subside. However, 897 families were in shelters as of the middle of March, with several weeks of cold weather still ahead.

The rise in family homelessness parallels a similar rise in individual homelessness. By the end of January, more than 4,000 people were receiving emergency care, with local media sources stating that the record levels of homelessness observed last year would likely be outpaced by the time spring arrives. Last year saw a historically unprecedented 13 percent increase in overall homelessness within the city.

The rise in DC homelessness has been presided over by a series of Democratic Party administrations. While current Democratic mayor Muriel Bowser criticized the "inhumane" approach of her predecessor Vincent Gray, the homelessness crisis continues to escalate.

Gray had attempted to circumvent the District's legally binding obligation to house homeless individuals by establishing makeshift shelters in the

gymnasiums of two defunct recreational centers. His decision was an effort to curb District payments for motel rooms scattered across the greater DC Metro area, including rooms located in parts of Maryland, which were being used as additional shelter for the "overflow" homeless population that could not be housed within DC itself. In January of last year a DC Superior Court judge overturned this policy, ruling that the crowded and noisy makeshift shelters were an unacceptable substitute for individual rooms with four walls and a bed.

An article in the *Washington Post* noted that Gray presided over the capital's sharpest increase in family homelessness since the years of the Reagan administration. Last year, the Gray administration publicly estimated that at any given time, roughly 5,000 DC families were teetering on the brink of homelessness, only obtaining housing by crowding into shared apartments or drifting between multiple addresses.

For her part, Bowser took office with the stated intention of "ending chronic homelessness" in the District. However, the homeless crisis quickly threatened to exhaust the miserly \$19 million in funds for "overflow" homeless services appropriated for this year. With money running out, city officials announced last month that they would soon run out of available motel rooms.

The Bowser administration then filed a formal judicial request seeking to lift the District's legal obligation to house the homeless in private rooms on freezing winter nights. However, the motion was quickly withdrawn, with officials claiming that another set of available rooms had been found.

Last week, the Bowser administration publicly released its plan to end chronic homelessness within

five years involving a limited increase in “permanent supportive housing” and permanent units. However, even if Bowser’s plans were completely fulfilled, it would still leave a substantial number of people on the street. In fact, a stated goal of the plan is to reduce the number of single adults staying in shelters each night from about 2,200 to 950 by 2020.

Bowser’s plan also calls for the closure of DC General, a former hospital in the southeastern region of the city that has been converted into a massive homeless shelter with more than 2,000 residents. Conditions at DC General are deplorable, with residents having to contend with mildew, skin parasites, rotten food and routine drug trafficking. However, the plan is not to close the shelter based on a decrease in the population of chronically homeless, but to simply shift the homeless to smaller, neighborhood-based shelters.

The homelessness crisis in Washington, DC, is intimately bound up with the rapidly escalating cost of housing. A recent study conducted by the DC Fiscal Policy Institute found that it is virtually impossible to rent an apartment in the capital for less than \$800 a month. Zumper, a rental search site, reports that DC has the fourth most expensive rental market of the 50 largest cities in the country, with the median rental cost for a single-bedroom apartment set at \$2,000.

The number of residences renting for \$1,400 or more a month has ballooned from 28,000 in 2002 to over 73,000, and now constitutes more than 50 percent of total housing in the city.

A February report conducted by *Governing* magazine found that Washington, DC, ranked second in the nation in terms of its rate of “gentrification.” A Census-based tract of city land was considered to have “gentrified” if median home value in the area jumped from the bottom 40th percentile in 2000 to the top one-third percentile by 2009-2013. The only American city with a higher rate of gentrification was Portland, Oregon.



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