

US homeless total increases for the first time in seven years

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A report published by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) found that the number of homeless individuals in the United States has increased for the first time since 2009. On a single night in late January 2017, when the point-in-time count was conducted across the country, some 553,742 people were recorded as homeless in the US.

Nearly two-thirds of the homeless were staying in emergency shelters or transitional housing programs, while one third were living on the streets or in shacks and other abandoned dwellings classified as unfit for human habitation. The vast majority of the unsheltered homeless were in California, Texas and Florida.

The number of homeless individuals has increased by 1 percent, or 3,814 people, since 2016. Over one-fifth of homeless individuals were children under 18, some 114,508, and 10 percent were between the ages 18 and 24. About 36,000 youth between the ages of 18 and 24 were homeless without families, as were about 4,800 children under the age of 18.

The unsheltered accounted for the entire increase in homelessness from 2016 to 2017. California alone accounted for an increase of 16,136 homeless year-on-year, more than the total net increase nationwide (in other words, outside of California, homelessness actually declined slightly).

California has by far the largest number of unsheltered people, nearly 92,000, and the highest proportion of homeless people outside of shelters, some 68.2 percent. New York state accounts for the largest number of homeless people living in shelters—nearly 85,000, compared to 43,000 in California. New York also has the largest percentage increase in homelessness over the past decade, a staggering 43 percent, while the national total, as counted by HUD, has declined slightly.

Five states account for half of all the homeless people in the US, with Florida (32,190), Texas (23,548) and Washington state (21,112) following California and New York.

The issues of underemployment and low wages are key factors in the number of homeless individuals in the US. The various statistics used to indicate the success or recovery of the economy are misleading as well. For example, Harvard Professor Lawrence Katz found that nearly 94 percent of jobs created between 2005 and 2015 have been contingent—temporary, short-term or on contract.

Press reports tell the story of “nomadic” workers who live in their vehicles while working for Amazon, unable to afford proper housing. A significant portion of the workers travel in order to obtain temporary jobs during Amazon’s peak season, when shipping demands are at their highest.

The social crisis workers face is only exacerbated by the Trump administration. This week, the White House has been pushing to compel those receiving federal aid to work for assistance, particularly SNAP (food stamps). The US Department of Agriculture announced it would work with states to “promote self-sufficiency.” Denying eligibility for food stamps will only swell the toll of homelessness and extreme poverty, with desperate people forced to choose between feeding their children and paying the rent. Already one in eight individuals and 12 million children face food insecurity.

“The American dream has never been to live on government benefits,” wrote Brandon Lipps, the Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service administrator. “People who can work should work. We must facilitate the transition for individuals and families to become independent...”

Homelessness among US veterans declined over the past decade, only to rise by 2 percent between 2016 and 2017. The Trump administration aims to encourage this trend, reneging on an election campaign promise to house all homeless veterans. The Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) recently announced that a \$460 million program that targeted chronically ill and vulnerable veterans would be ended, then abruptly reversed itself after a public outcry. Further cuts can be expected in a budget deal with congressional Republicans and Democrats.

More broadly, in the wake of the Senate passage of massive tax cuts for the wealthy, congressional Republican leaders are looking to slash funding for social programs such as Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security.

House Speaker Paul Ryan stated that the Republican Party aims to reduce spending on social programs, arguing for the need to reduce the federal deficit. At an appearance on a talk radio show, Ryan stated, “Frankly, it's the health care entitlements that are the big drivers of our debt, so we spend more time on the health care entitlements—because that's really where the problem lies, fiscally speaking.”

Senator Marco Rubio added, “You also have to bring spending under control. And not discretionary spending. That isn't the driver of our debt. The driver of our debt is the structure of Social Security and Medicare for future beneficiaries.”



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