

# Some advocates see holes in HUD data, argue that homelessness may not be on the decline

Local December 10, 2016 By Jordan Frias

The image features the lowercase letters 'scn' in a large, white, serif font against a solid black background. The letters are widely spaced and centered horizontally.

The narrative that homelessness is on the decline nationally and in Massachusetts is something that local homeless advocates find hard to believe.

Recently released reports from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) say that there are less homeless families, veterans and disabled persons on the street this year than in previous years, yet some say those statistics arguably don't show the entire picture of what's actually occurring.

Megan Hustings, interim director at the National Coalition for the Homeless, said HUD fails to collect data from places that don't receive federal funding, which she says leaves out approximately 75 percent of shelters throughout the country.

"It's definitely not the case," Hustings said. "It's not a complete count. It's only a count of those served by HUD."

She continued, "Although HUD is funding permanent supportive housing, which is amazing work, it's leaving a lot of people behind and out in the cold and that's not reflected in those numbers."

HUD data for Massachusetts shows almost a 10 percent decrease in the number of homeless families and individuals experiencing chronic homelessness in 2016. The data shows an even larger decrease in homeless veterans, recorded at 16.2 percent.

However many homeless youth, young adults and families are overlooked by this report unless they are accessing services, according to Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless Legal Advocacy Director Kelly Turley.

"In terms of veterans and those experiencing chronic homelessness we have a sense that those numbers have decreased, but on the family side it all depends on who's in the shelters," Turley said. "Fifty percent of families in Massachusetts are denied access to shelters, so in many cases they have to double up or live in situations that are not meant for human habitation."

The difficulty in counting those who don't or can't access services is something that is not unique to HUD, Turley said, but gives advocacy groups like hers reason to challenge the barriers that exist and the need to change eligibility requirements for certain services.

"States narrow eligibility criteria for families, which means many lie under the radar," Turley said. "Until we begin to address youth and young adult homelessness they will continue to be undercounted."

Libby Hayes, executive director of Homes for Families — a statewide social change organization dedicated to ending homelessness — echoed Turley's concern that families are undercounted and emphasized the need to strengthen long-term housing programs for families rather than count those that are in short-term situations as no longer being homeless.

Hayes said that 50 percent of homeless families aren't even eligible for shelters and pointed to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's numbers on homeless students. She said those numbers actually show a consistent increase in that population.

"There's sort of two takeaways from this report: there is definitely a lot of progress that is being made but the undercounting of families shows a problem of people not qualifying for the assistance they would need to escape homelessness," Hayes said. "The eligibility criteria is extremely complicated, there are a lot of

requirements you have to meet. So there are certainly lots of reasons that preclude a family from being eligible.”

Lack of data on the number of homeless people that have been staying in shelters long-term is also an issue, Joe Finn, executive director of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, said.

Finn believes that the point-in-time numbers reported by HUD, for the most part, are reflective of what is happening, particularly around the issues of chronic homelessness and homeless veterans.

“Shelters still experience some tension at the front door, so you have people saying, ‘How can there be a decline in homelessness?’” Finn said. “But no one can deny we don’t have as many people who are homeless, but we do have people staying in shelters longer.”

For Finn, extended stays at homeless shelters due to a lack of affordable housing is really the issue that is being poorly addressed.

“If we had a rapid re-housing strategy then I think we could dramatically ease the pressure in terms of shelter capacity,” Finn said. “We know there are things that work. We need to build a system that is committed to that.”



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