

Despite report, some say homelessness still a big problem in Massachusetts

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"There are decreases in the count, but we're not necessarily seeing decreases in homelessness," said Kelly Turley, associate director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless.

According to the latest estimate from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, homelessness in Massachusetts decreased 10.4 percent since 2016. The results are based on a single-night, point-in-time count conducted by volunteers and regional planning agencies called "continuums of care." The Jan. 25, 2017 count found 17,565 homeless people in Massachusetts. Homelessness among families was down 14.2 percent from the previous year. The number of homeless veterans decreased 10 percent statewide since the previous year, and 46.6 percent since 2010.

The results were released Dec. 6.

"The collaborative work that has been done by our local, state and federal partners in Massachusetts towards ending homelessness is to be commended," said David Tille, HUD New England Regional Administrator. "We know that there is more work to be done but the dedicated statewide partnership efforts taking place on the ground increases the likelihood that we will succeed."

While Turley said HUD's annual snapshot, which uses consistent methodology each year, is useful to help understand some of the issues surrounding homelessness, she cautions reading too much into the numbers.

"Their emphasis is on families and individuals already connected to shelters, and they don't necessarily get to people who are sharing housing with family and friends or are in a hidden location," she said. "This is just the tip of the iceberg in who is experiencing homelessness."

In Massachusetts, families trying to get into a homeless shelter must often show proof that they've been living in a place that's not meant for human habitation. Between 45 and 50 percent of families are turned away from shelters their first time trying to get in, Turley said.

"They're not captured in this point-in-time count," she said. "It would be shocking if there really were 10.4 percent decrease in homelessness when housing costs are going up and there haven't been new infusions of funding in homeless prevention or affordable housing."

In Cambridge, city officials say a high cost of living and a shortage of affordable housing pose persistent challenges to combating homelessness. The city has seen fairly stable levels of homelessness in its annual point-in-time counts.

For Cambridge, the point-in-time count showed 530 people experiencing homelessness, a 3 percent increase from 2016. The count found homelessness among Cambridge families with children increased 14 percent. That jump was due in large part to the expansion of a transitional housing project that went from serving six families in 2016 to 15 families in 2017, said Cambridge Continuum of Care planner Liz Mengers.

"The key point really is that we show a small increase in family homelessness, which is the result of having some additional transitional housing units counted in, and we show a small decrease in individual homelessness," said Ellen Semonoff, Cambridge's assistant city manager for human services. "The bottom line is that we have really seen stable numbers despite small ups and downs over the last 10 years."

The Department of Housing and Urban Development released its 2017 report, which provided the number of homeless people in each of the Continuum of Care Regions. Here is a list of those numbers by region in Massachusetts. Hover over the map and the lines in the graph to learn more.

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