

As housing costs rise, so does California homelessness, report shows

San Francisco Chronicle, SFGate, by Kevin Fagan, December 7, 2017, updated 9:27 a.m.

Homelessness has shot up in California and elsewhere on the West Coast over the past two years, a federal report said Wednesday, as rising rents and other housing pressures forced more people from the margins onto the street.

California's homeless population went up 14 percent, to 134,278 — the most by far of any state, and representing 31 percent of all the individual homeless people in the U.S., according to the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. New York had the second-largest homeless population, at 89,503, a 4 percent increase.

Homelessness also went up significantly in Oakland, Sacramento, San Diego, Seattle and Los Angeles, according to HUD's annual snapshot assessment of street populations nationwide. San Francisco was an exception — its homeless population has stayed virtually flat at about 7,499.

The federal counts were based on one-night tallies done since 2015. HUD's totals for 2016 included counts done that year and the year before.

Like so many displaced people, Ronald Weeks has lost everything he owns more than once. He is one of about 50 people living in a homeless encampment along Wood St. in Oakland. Recently, he has dedicated his time to building homes for the people in his community. His first one, which he built for himself, is nearly complete. Unfortunately, Weeks may lose it before he has the chance to move in. A developer has purchased the land on which it sits and has given him, and others, two weeks notice to vacate the property. Despite the setback Weeks remains hopeful. "I'm not going to give up", he says, "I'm not giving up on any of these people." He hopes to continue his mission of helping himself and others by building homes elsewhere.

HUD said that throughout the United States, 553,742 people were homeless this year — a 1 percent increase over 2016, and the first time the national count has risen since 2010.

Officials caution that such counts are rough estimates at best, but that absent a more comprehensive system, they at least give indications of where work is needed.

And that work, HUD Secretary Ben Carson said Wednesday, should be aimed at building more housing — especially along the West Coast and in big cities elsewhere. Overall, 30 states showed declines in homelessness and 20 showed increases.

"If you eliminated those places (the large cities with increases), you'd see a downward trend," Carson said in announcing the new tallies. "But the commonality in those places is rising rents. We're going to have to really concentrate on, how do we answer the problem of affordable housing?"

The most troublesome areas along the West Coast included Oakland, where homelessness has gone up 39 percent since 2015, and Los Angeles, where the street count increased 26 percent, to 55,188, since 2016.

The biggest driver in the increase in homelessness across the nation was in the unsheltered population, meaning those who are not in shelters, rehabilitation programs or other emergency beds. That went up 9 percent nationally, offsetting improvements in the sheltered counts.

A Chronicle examination of homeless counts throughout California in the summer found that surging housing prices and rents, and stagnant wages, were driving indigence up not just in most urban areas, but in rural communities as well.

Matthew Doherty, head of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, said Wednesday that the rising rents and other housing pressures are the big contributors to homelessness in the most troubled regions, such as California.

“Limited supply and skyrocketing rents are impacting our ability to see such progress in some parts of the country,” Doherty said as he announced the new numbers with Carson.

He told The Chronicle that San Francisco’s more encouraging count could be attributed to the city’s consolidation of efforts on supportive housing and services over the past year, through the creation of the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing.

The head of that department, Jeff Kositsky, said it was a relief not to be singled out as a problem area. In particular, he noted that the city’s unsheltered proportion of the homeless population is at 58 percent, compared with the state’s overall proportion of 68 percent.

“San Francisco has often been pointed out as the city that’s struggling with various issues, and I’m glad that now we’re not showing up on the lists as having the biggest increases,” Kositsky said. “This isn’t cause for celebration. We’ll celebrate when the number is zero.

“But it’s an indication that our work is working, and that Mayor (Ed) Lee’s vision of creating a single department to better amplify the city’s previous efforts is showing results.”

Kevin Fagan is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: kfagan@sfchronicle.com