

# SF's new count shows homeless people spreading into neighborhoods

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A homeless man sleeps on the sidewalk on Ellis Street and Jones, an area known for its chronic homeless encampments, while a police car passes by on Thursday, June 15, 2017 in San Francisco, Calif.

For the past two years, San Franciscans have complained about homeless tent cities sprouting in alarming numbers outside of the central part of town — and now they have statistics to back up those complaints.

The city's biennial one-night homeless count, to be released Friday, shows that since 2015 the western half of the city and significant residential strips of the rest of San Francisco have seen sharp increases in people living on the street — even as the citywide population of homeless people actually dipped by 0.5 percent, to 7,499.

From the western side of town to the city's northeastern tip, more people are now without permanent shelter. The numeric increases were small, in many cases, but the percentage rises were startling.

In the area including the Richmond District, the number of homeless people recorded during the one-night survey in January was 136, nearly double the 77 counted in 2015. In a swath of the Inner Sunset and down to Lake Merced, the total more than tripled, to 91 from 29 two years ago.

Homelessness is also spreading into tourist-magnet neighborhoods such as Fisherman's Wharf and North Beach. That area, stretching down to the Ferry Building, had the largest numeric increase of any city neighborhood since 2015 — 258 more homeless denizens, up 106 percent.

The Tenderloin and the area surrounding it remain the epicenter of homelessness, with 49 percent of the citywide population. But with gentrification and widespread construction downtown pushing homeless people into the neighborhoods, the count in the core area fell by 536 people — 13 percent.

City policy managers said the new count reflects what they've been saying for the past year: Creating more housing, street counseling and Navigation Center multiservice shelters are making a difference in the toughest neighborhoods, but now the approach needs to be taken citywide.

"This report didn't tell us anything we didn't already know, and we are making progress," said Jeff Kositsky, director of the city Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing. "I think by the next count of 2019, you'll see a noticeable decrease."

Kositsky pointed to several numbers in the new count that he said showed that the city, if not winning the fight against homelessness, is doing better than it has for several years.

The tally of homeless families dipped slightly, from 212 in 2015 to 190 this year, and the number of chronically homeless veterans — those who have been on the streets for more than a year, with acute problems such as substance addiction — dropped from 196 to 137. The number of homeless students in the San Francisco Unified School District dipped 12 percent, to 1,844 — the first time that number has been below 2,000 since 2010.

"This is the first time the (citywide) count has gone down in a long time, and I think that's a recognition of the fact that we're having success," Kositsky said. "We're starting to bend the curve on families, veterans and education, because that's where we're putting some extra energy."

But San Francisco continues to struggle with the most visible, most troubled people without permanent shelter — those considered chronically homeless. Unlike the subgroup of veterans, the overall number of chronically homeless people shot up 31 percent, to 2,138.

Still, the city's 0.5 percent decline in its overall homeless population was a more favorable report card than many other West Coast jurisdictions received. Alameda County's homeless count went up 39 percent. Los Angeles County's was up 23 percent, and King County in Washington, which includes Seattle, saw a 16 percent increase.

The count, required every two years for federal funding, was conducted by an army of city workers and volunteers on Jan. 26 and provides the most complete snapshot of the city's homeless population. This year's tally was more comprehensive than ever, enlisting new technological methods and a record 768 volunteers.

In previous counts, the number of individuals — generally adults, but also some youths — was the one emphasized most. That number went up 4 percent in this year's tally, to 6,986. But since 2013 the city has also been refining its separate, simultaneous count of people ages 24 and younger, and this year officials began adding that count to the overall total.

That means that under the new counting system, the total homeless population of San Francisco was set at 7,499, down 0.5 percent from the combined count of 2015.

For those living in areas where the numbers are growing despite the overall drop, the new statistics bolster their calls for new services, housing and shelter.

"This confirms what my constituents have been saying, that we have a homeless crisis — and it is great timing for these numbers to come out now," said Supervisor Hillary Ronen, whose district takes in the Mission District and saw an increase of 24 percent. "Our Van Ness (Avenue) Navigation Center opens up soon, and hopefully this will greatly improve the tent-encampment crisis in the Mission. But we need more."

Ronen has joined Kositsky and Mayor Ed Lee in calling for neighborhoods unaccustomed to homeless shelters and services to accept the need for them. Ronen said the new count strengthens their case.

"We haven't built enough of the infrastructure — supportive housing and Navigation Centers — to actually solve the problem," she said. "Instead, police move people from in front of one person's house to another house instead of getting people actually housed with services."

Supervisor Sandra Lee Fewer, whose district includes the Richmond, was not surprised by the new figures. She attributed some of the 76 percent increase of homeless people in her district to rising rents and housing shortages.

"We've been hearing that homeless camps and people have been moving all over the city for quite some time now, and ... we hadn't seen a rise like this before," Fewer said. "It's extremely alarming. It just seems like the problem gets bigger and deeper."

"What I am also concerned about is people who are marginally homeless, not so visible — living in vehicles, or those who have been newly evicted," Fewer said. "We're seeing a lot of people getting evicted in my neighborhood of the Richmond, people who had lived there 40 years in rental apartments."

"Once you lose your housing, you tend to stay in the community you know. So I am not surprised at all to see my district's numbers go up."

Kositsky and his staff hope a comprehensive system they are assembling to track homeless people through the services they use will give a more accurate count. Kositsky says the actual count of homeless people served through the year would come closer to 14,000 than the smaller total reflected in the biennial, one-night snapshot.

*Kevin Fagan is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer.*