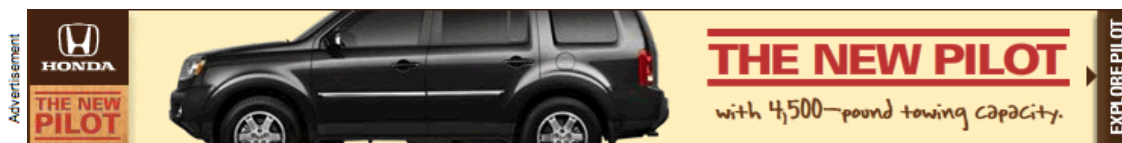


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HUD gets new view of who's homeless

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By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY



Enlarge

By Lynne Sladky, AP

Edward Bush, 60, left, talks with Lori Fernandez, right, of the Miami Homeless Assistance Program in February 2007. Bush, who is homeless, agreed to stay in a shelter that night as temperatures were expected to drop into the 40's.

A groundbreaking survey of homelessness being released today found that 704,000 people nationwide sought shelter at least once in a three-month period.

Families with children accounted for one-third of those seeking emergency shelter or transitional housing between February and April 2005, the most recent period studied, according to the report by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The rest were individuals, mostly adult men. Nearly half were black.

The count covered only those seeking shelter, not people living on the street, so the total number of homeless people would be higher.

"This first-of-its-kind study is a huge leap forward in our understanding of not only how many people are homeless, but also what their needs are," HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson

says. The report says, for example, that at least a quarter are disabled.

HUD, which briefed USA TODAY on the report Monday, says it is the most comprehensive government estimate ever of homelessness. Previous counts looked only at the number of people homeless on a given day or week.

The three-month figure — equal to the population of South Dakota — is an estimate based on a sample of 80 communities. It will serve as a baseline for annual reports to Congress and may be expanded to include people living on the street.

Martha Burt, a homelessness scholar at the Urban Institute, says the new database has shortcomings. For example, it has limited information about the health of those seeking shelter, and she thinks future versions will have trouble tracking those living on the street.

HUD's report also cites a previously reported one-night survey of hundreds of communities in January 2005. That survey found 754,000 homeless people, including 45% who were living on the street. USA TODAY published its own estimate of 727,000 in October 2005, based on earlier tallies.

The three-month count found that on an average day, 335,000 people sought shelter, but more than twice that number sought shelter at least once during the entire period.

Dennis Culhane, a professor of social policy at the University of Pennsylvania who co-wrote the HUD report, says it's unclear whether homelessness has increased or declined, because past estimates were done differently.

He says poverty among blacks, who are more likely to live in urban areas, runs deeper than for other groups.

Culhane says families with kids have remained a steady one-third of the homeless, and he says government needs to do more to provide housing, such as expanding rent subsidies.

One of every three homeless kids has a diagnosable psychiatric disorder, such as post-traumatic stress, by age 8, says Ellen Bassuk, a psychiatrist who is president of the National Center on Family Homelessness.

"They have trouble sitting still and learning in school," she says.

Nine of 10 homeless mothers have been victims of violence, often domestic, she says.

Michael Stoops, director of the National Coalition for the Homeless welcomes the new count but says more housing and shelters are needed as well as a focus on the root causes of the problem. He says homelessness "can happen to everyone."

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