



Drop in homeless count seen as 'success story'

By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY

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The U.S. had 12% fewer homeless last year than in 2005, and the greatest decline occurred among those who chronically live on the streets or in emergency shelters, according to a federal report to be released Tuesday.

"This is a success story," says Dennis Culhane, a University of Pennsylvania professor and co-author of the report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). He attributes the decline to better tracking and to increased efforts to house the "chronically homeless" — disabled adults who are continuously homeless for at least a year.

The number of people on the street or in emergency shelters on a single night in January, the month in which the tally was taken, fell from 763,010 in 2005 to 671,888 last year, the report says. Most were homeless temporarily. Among those who were chronically homeless, the number fell from 175,914 in 2005 to 123,833 in 2007.

"This reduction is the largest documented decrease in homelessness in our nation's history," says Philip Mangano, executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, which coordinates federal efforts. He says it shows that the increase in housing units for the long-term homeless, funded by HUD and communities, is working.

Homeless advocates say the data, which come from 3,800 cities and counties that receive HUD funds, do not count every homeless person and do not reflect this year's weaker economy.

"Chronic homelessness may be down, but the non-chronic population is increasing," says Michael Stoops, acting executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group. He says he's getting reports of shelters filling with families that have lost homes to foreclosure.

A lot of people become homeless when they are forced to choose between paying for food and gas, which have sharply increased in cost this year, or housing, says Nan Roman, president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, a non-profit group.

"These are tough times," says Culhane, adding that homeless numbers often reflect the economy. He says this year's homeless data, which HUD is starting to receive for January, paints a "mixed" picture of increases in some areas, such as Connecticut, and decreases in others, including New York City.

Mangano sees an upside to the weak housing market, saying foreclosures create opportunities for communities to buy properties at lower prices to use as shelters.

For the first time, HUD's report includes a count of people using shelters or transitional housing during a full year. From October 2006 to September 2007, 1.6 million people sought help for homelessness. Of those, 69% were men, 64% were minorities, and 30% were in families.