

# Butte County reaches record number of homeless, according to point-in-time count

*By Ashiah Scharaga, Enterprise-Record*

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Chico >> At least 1,900 people are homeless in Butte County.

Most of them have been living on the streets longer than a year, and are suffering from severe, untreated mental illness.

Almost 100 of them are children not even old enough to go to school. More than 50 are older than 66, and as old as 84.

Sherisse Allen, of Housing Tools, reported the latest Homeless Point-in-Time Survey results Thursday afternoon at the Butte Countywide Homeless Continuum of Care's annual meeting. The full report is accessible at [buttehomelesscoc.com](http://buttehomelesscoc.com).

The purpose of the report is to help inform the county, to provide facts that can override the feelings that arise with a complex issue like homelessness, she said. It is a federal requirement and a factor when it comes to state and federal financial assistance granted to the county.

This year represents a record number of homeless people who have been surveyed in the study's history, since 2009. Exactly 1,983 people were homeless and willing to be interviewed during a 24-hour period in January. The last survey collected input from just 1,127 people in 2015.

Allen said this increase may be explained because there are more people without homes in the county or because of the survey's methodology changes.

## Demographics

Most people surveyed reported that they were single adults: 1,583 respondents. They were mainly straight, white men, with 62 percent reporting they were male, 88 percent reporting they were straight and 73 percent reporting they were white.

Chico had the highest count, with 1,096 individuals, representing a 92 percent increase since 2015, according to the report. Oroville had the second highest count, with 713 people, a 83 percent increase. Paradise also saw a significant increase in homeless residents this year.

The survey includes people who were sheltered during the count in January, but most were unsheltered.

All subpopulations surveyed increased from the 2015 survey: veterans, college students, youth, victims of domestic violence, single adults and families.

Allen said defining residency is often a contentious issue — the definition this survey used was based on the years people lived here.

More than three-fourths of the adults and unaccompanied youth who completed a survey lived in Butte County for more than three years, according to the report, and more than half of those surveyed had lived in the county for over 10 years. Almost 90 percent considered Butte County their home.

“This gives us an idea of the housing that needs to be developed,” Allen said.

So many people who were not born in the county came here for the same reasons many non-natives do, she said: family, college, quality of life and job opportunities.

“Family brought people to Butte County,” she said, whether it was caring for an ill family member or moving closer to their children.

#### Barriers to care

A new survey element this year addressed obstacles that people feel they have to becoming housed. An overwhelming number reported affordable housing and no money for rent or deposit as the top two barriers they faced.

Allen said that turned out to be the theme of the point-in-time count this year.

“We need affordable housing, period,” she said.

The available housing stock is extraordinarily low in Butte County, with vacancy rates ranging from only one to two percent, according to Ed Mayer, Housing Authority of the County of Butte executive director. For 90 percent of those surveyed, their income would not cover the county median rent of about \$900/month, let alone typical household and family expenses.

Other hurdles were finding a job and poor or no credit history.

More than 500 are experiencing homelessness for the first time this year. Allen said this is an important discovery because it means the current available resources and support systems have not been able to prevent people from lapsing into homelessness, no matter their effectiveness for other people and families.

A family crisis was listed as the primary cause for survey responders' homeless, with the second reason being employment and financial resources.

Other topics covered by the report include information about the impact of local ordinances (like Chico's sit and lie and offenses to public property ordinances), long-term residency of homeless youth, and the number of homeless people who have experienced domestic violence. The report findings include intensive use of emergency rooms and law enforcement for a minority of people who are homeless and a critical need for housing and food support for the growing number of homeless college students.

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