

# SF homeless count shows adult, chronic homelessness on the rise

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*16th and Utah Streets. Barricades to prevent homeless encampments on one side and an encampment on the other. Photo by Lola M. Chavez*

A bi-annual count of San Francisco's homeless population released Friday shows the homeless count in the Mission District rising by 100 residents to 510, the third highest count in the city.

South of Market tops the list with 3,655 homeless residents and the Bayview is second with 1,245 homeless residents, according to the tally of a single night in January.

Citywide, the the number of homeless residents stands at 7,449 – down roughly one percent from the 7,539 counted in 2015.

Behind that one percent figure is a story of successes and failures. The number of homeless youth is down by 28 percent to 1,363, the number of families is down by 10 percent to 190 and the number of chronically homeless veterans is down from 208 in 2015 to 137 individuals in 2017.

The cost of that success offers an indication of the challenge. Jeff Kositsky, head of the Department on Homelessness and Supportive Housing, said at Friday's press conference that the city has invested "smartly and wisely and well and significantly" on homelessness and pointed out that, "during the last four years we have seen a quadrupling in our investments in permanent supportive housing for youth."

The funds and effort, the January count shows, managed over the last two years to reduce the number of homeless people in families to a reported 26 and get 199 youth and unaccompanied children and 59 chronically homeless veterans off the streets.

At the same time, adults on the streets jumped by four percent to 6,986, the chronically homeless, defined as residents homeless for more than a year or who have experienced at least

four episodes of homelessness in the last three years to 2,138 and the overall number of homeless veterans increased by 31 percent since 2013.

“We are learning that people are staying homeless longer. People who are homeless are getting older. And people who are experiencing homelessness are getting sicker on our streets,” said Kositsky.

The chronically homeless living in tent encampments, a population that hovers at around 400, has stayed “relatively flat,” according to Kositsky.

His agency has removed 11 large scale tent encampments from the Mission and surrounding neighborhoods over the past year, but the campers soon pitch new tents, sometimes just around the corner from their old encampment.

While the count is a methodological measure to track the city’s progress on the issue, Kositsky said that the count fails to reflect the people who come to the city seeking services, bringing the number of the city’s homeless closer to 15,000.

Homeless advocates have long estimated that the actual number of the city’s homeless hovers around 18,000.

“We are making progress in very focused populations, like families, but it’s disturbing that the total number of homeless veterans has gone up given the federal resources,” said Jennifer Friedenbach, director of the Coalition on Homelessness. “We are doing very poorly when it comes to chronic homeless and the encampments, which cross over.”

At the Mission Neighborhood Health Center, Deputy Director Fernando Gomez-Benitez said that the number of homeless clients seeking the center’s services has steadily increased in recent years.

Though Mayor Ed Lee has set aside new funding for mental health and substance abuse treatment services, Gomez-Benitez said the city needs a more rigorous partnership between city departments and service providers – one that combines outreach, case management and a pathway to housing.

Even then, however, at the end of the pathway, there is simply not enough housing – on the books or in the process of being built.

Still Gomez-Benitez said the city could do better.

“I think we are not going to be able to decrease the number of homeless in a short period of time if there isn’t a reform, redesign of the whole system on behalf of the city and their programs and on behalf of the community programs and a major coordination with both pieces,” he said.

For his part, Kositsky appeared optimistic and said his goal remains to reduce chronic homelessness by 50 percent in the next five years, with help from a \$100 million donation by the local nonprofit Tipping Point.

In addition to the city’s \$241 million budget for homelessness, San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee has pledged another \$65 million over the next two years to bolster mental health and substance abuse services.

So far, we know that the new money will add 40 new mental health beds at San Francisco General Hospital and create a 24-hour drop in center in the Tenderloin and bolster existing services.

A survey of 1,104 homeless individuals showed that 53 percent of respondents had at least one disabling conditions – 41 percent reported substance abuse issues and another 39 percent reported psychiatric or emotional conditions.

Kositsky said that his department will release a strategic plan next month to address the city’s chronically homeless population. The department has also begun to roll out a comprehensive system tracking homeless individuals in the city’s system of care that Kositsky promised will be more accurate than a one 24-hour point in time count. That system, called the online Navigation and entry system, is expected to be fully deployed by June of next year.