

## There are now more homeless kids and parents in D.C. than single adults for the first time

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The number of homeless families in the District has soared by more than 30 percent compared to a year ago, according to a new federal estimate released Wednesday.

For the first time since the annual census began in 2005, homeless families in D.C. outnumbered homeless single adults, a population beset by mental illness and disabilities that has historically loomed as the larger and more in-trac-table problem in cities nationwide. On one day in late January, officials counted 4,667 homeless parents and children, compared to 3,686 single adults.

It is impossible to know precisely what is driving is fueling the increase. But city officials and housing advocates agree that rising real estate costs in one of the country's hottest markets combined with expanded social services have led to more families without a permanent place to call home showing up at city shelters.

"We are in the midst of a very serious affordable housing crisis," said Kate Coventry, an analyst at the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, a left-leaning non-profit that wants more government resources devoted to the problem.

The surge in homeless families can be traced in part to Mayor Muriel E. Bowser's fulfillment of a campaign pledge to make it easier for vulnerable women and children to receive city services. Her administration dropped a requirement that families must wait until freezing nights to receive open-ended placements in city shelters or overflow motel rooms.

The mayor has proposed spending about \$173 million on all homeless-related services this year. That's more than the city spends to operate all libraries, parks, and the University of District of Columbia combined.

Coventry and Amber Harding, an attorney with the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, said the move to year-round access has been a major improvement for families.

Under Bowser's predecessor, Vincent C. Gray, restrictive city policies kept many homeless people from getting services and tamped down the numbers in the shelters, Harding said.

"The increase reflects the fact that this administration is actually funding and serving families who are in crisis," she said.

But the increase in demand has been so dramatic, it has raised doubts about Bowser's approach and whether she can control a problem that by many measures is only getting worse.

The rise in homeless families is tied to a string of social and government failures, observers say. Some of the homeless are foster children who did not successfully transition to adulthood through District programs. Many are young women who became pregnant as teens.

Others dropped out of troubled D.C. public schools and have few job skills.

But Bowser's administration blames housing affordability, saying soaring rents have made it nearly impossible for a single mothers to make ends meet and pushed those with few resources to the street.

The mayor has proposed a costly plan to build and lease new family shelter sites, which she says will enable the city to better provide parents with job training and childcare so they can more quickly transition to permanent housing.

But according to the latest homeless count, the shelters would house just 25 percent of families now in city care. Bowser's recent budget submissions also show that even as the new

shelters open, the city would continue to warehouse the majority of homeless families in roadside motel rooms in D.C. and Maryland.

With or without new shelters, advocates also warn the new data show the mayor is already falling behind on a master plan she released last year to join other big U.S. cities in ending chronic homelessness by the end of 2017 and housing all families in the city by 2018.

Regarding chronic homelessness, advocates for the poor say the mayor has short-changed her promise to subsidize permanent housing for the most troubled singles and families by more than \$20 million in the budget year beginning in October. In recent days, those advocates have gone around the mayor, lobbying council members to fully fund the plan.

They also say Bowser has earmarked far too few slots for affordable housing units for homeless families — about 100 new spots, or less than 10 percent of the population now in shelter.

“Looking at the mayor’s budget numbers, it’s worrying that there is not a greater investment,” said Coventry of the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute. “Without that, the District will not be on track to end chronic homelessness, as stated in the mayor’s plan.”

Laura Green Zeilinger, who oversees the city’s homeless services, had predicted last year that the city’s homeless census could look worse this year before it gets better.

She and Bowser chose last year to expand access to shelters before implementing new programs to keep the population from growing. That meant 464 families entered shelters before winter, and about the same number as last year — 1,000 — sought shelter during hypothermic nights.

Zeilinger said the administration took that tact to meet the needs of the city’s most vulnerable despite the fact that it would mean a higher tally in the annual census administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

“Rather than having them wait until it got cold, we were able to help families earlier, and because of that, we know that we are providing better services and support than in previous years, and that’s important,” Zeilinger said.

The count is a snapshot taken in cities nationwide on the same night, often with thousands of volunteers scouring under bridges, in wooded areas and elsewhere to find the homeless.

In D.C., the planned count occurred as the city was digging out from a massive late January snowfall. Rather than conduct a physical search, officials counted the number of homeless families in shelters. Advocates said that was likely an accurate number because of extensive outreach to get the homeless off the streets and into shelters ahead of the storm.

But the annual count also doesn’t fully capture the scope of the District’s expansive homeless problem.

Any family that enters a shelter is entitled to one year or more of city-subsidized housing afterward. More than 1,100 families are living in such apartments. And about another 1,000 former homeless residents hold permanent housing vouchers because the city has determined they are unlikely to be able to support themselves.

Advocates say that if Bowser is serious about meeting her goals, funding for homeless services must increase by \$200 million, closer to the amount the city spends to run its Fire and Emergency Medical Services department.

“You can’t just say that you have a goal to end homelessness, you have to do something dramatic and huge to accomplish that,” Harding said.

*Aaron Davis covers D.C. government and politics for The Post and wants to hear your story about how D.C. works — or how it doesn’t. Follow @byaaroncdavis*