

Homelessness across the land — and here

[Joe Nathanson](#)//January 26, 2024//



As I write this, the day's low temperature in Baltimore was 14°F. In these coldest days of winter, one must have heightened concern for those who don't have a regular roof over their heads.

Homelessness, it seems, is both pervasive and persistent across the country. According to figures compiled by authorities, an estimated 650,000 individuals – about the equivalent of the entire population of the city of Boston – are without a permanent place to live.

Homelessness is most pronounced in some of America's largest, and often more expensive, cities. We have evidence of this from the annual Point-In-Time Count reports generated across the country. Each year, using guidelines set by the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, local communities deploy volunteers to conduct a count of persons living in homeless shelters, other temporary housing, as well as unsheltered arrangements.

The national report, Annual Homelessness Assessment Report, yields the following information: On a single night in January 2023, about 2 of every 1,000 people in the United States were experiencing homelessness.

Within this vulnerable population, 6 in 10 were in an emergency shelter, transitional housing, or a safe haven program (described as a refuge providing a safe, sanitary, flexible and stable environment for homeless people with mental illness). The remaining 4 in 10 were in even more precarious situations , meaning they were living in homeless encampments, under bridges, in the woods, in their cars, or on city streets.

Using the 2023 data, by far the largest populations of persons experiencing homelessness are in New York City (88,025; 10.6 per 1,000 population) and Los Angeles

(71,320; 18.7 per 1,000). All of the remaining top 10 cities, ranging from No. 3 Seattle (14,149; 18.9) and No. 4 San Diego (10,264; 7.4) to No. 10 San Francisco (7,582; 9.4) are located on the West Coast or in the Mountain West.

The most recent reported count of homeless persons in Baltimore City, provided by the Mayor's Office of Homeless Services (MOHS) listed 1,551 individuals (about 2.7 per 1,000). Clearly, Baltimore's concern with homelessness is of an entirely different order of magnitude compared to those of the cities cited above and, hopefully, more amenable to local intervention.

In order to address the problem of homelessness in Baltimore City, Mayor Brandon Scott and the MOHS announced in November two new initiatives. Using funds provided by the American Rescue Plan Act, the city will launch the House Baltimore program, which uses community partners to identify property owners who can make available suitable housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. The program will provide financial incentives to those property owners.

The second program, Flex Fund, will offer, according to the announcement, "short-term financial assistance to people at imminent risk of homelessness or those who have recently become homeless."

The United Way of Central Maryland will serve as the fiscal agent for both of these city programs. The United Way will have the responsibility of distributing incentive payments and reimbursements to House Baltimore property owners. It will also provide direct assistance to Flex Fund beneficiaries.

Reporting on the subject indicates that the causes of homelessness are varied and complex. They include the rising cost of housing, particularly rental housing; the lack of affordable housing in the existing housing stock; and the limited efforts by housing developers to deliver affordable units in new construction.

Substance abuse and mental illness are often involved; the decades-long process of deinstitutionalization, that is, the closing of hospitals and reduction of hospital beds for the mentally ill, is another contributing factor.

Young adults aging out of foster care are especially vulnerable to becoming homeless. Homelessness is also found to be more prevalent among veterans and the annual counts keep separate track of this group to better serve their needs.

Baltimore City is deploying the available ARPA funds to bridge a difficult stretch in this post-pandemic world. We know that the ARPA funds will at some point no longer be available. So, while these city initiatives address some immediate needs of individuals and families in difficult straits, one would hope to hear about longer term strategies to reduce the experience of homelessness.

We should all share the goal that homelessness here and across America is “rare and brief.”

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