

Hidden Homeless Emerge as US Economy Worsens

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SACRAMENTO, Calif. – Emergency shelters brimming with homeless people in California’s capital are quietly turning away more than 200 women and children a night in a sign of the deteriorating U.S. economy.

The displaced individuals on waiting lists at St. John’s Shelter and other facilities often turn instead to relatives or friends for temporary living quarters, perhaps moving into a spare room, garage or trailer. The less fortunate might sleep in their cars or a vacant storage unit.

They are the hidden homeless. And their ranks appear to be growing as rising joblessness and mortgage foreclosures take their toll in Sacramento and other U.S. cities, experts say.

U.S. President Barack Obama recognized the trend in his televised news conference this week, saying, “the homeless problem was bad even when the economy was good,” and he vowed to bring greater government resources to bear to deal with it.

“It is not acceptable for children and families to be without a roof over their heads in a country as wealthy as ours,” he said.

A “tent city” of up to 200 homeless in Sacramento was thrust into the media spotlight last month as a symbol of the battered U.S. economy. California authorities said this week they would shut down the illegal settlement and find other shelter for its residents, most of them chronically homeless.

Homeless advocates say they expect such encampments, which already exist around the country, to spread as the housing crisis worsens and shelters fill up.

“I think there’s a slight trickle of people who’ve been at risk of homelessness who are winding up in tent cities or knocking on shelter doors,” said Michael Stoops, director of the National Coalition for the Homeless in Washington. “I expect a tremendous increase in homelessness over the next couple of years.”

Stoops, who has worked with the homeless for 35 years, said the newly dispossessed often retain some income and seek initially to downsize or find cheaper accommodations.

WORST NIGHTMARE

“Their worst nightmare would be winding up on the streets, in a tent city or a shelter,” he said. “That’s the last stage. They will do everything they can before that happens to them.”

Maria Romero, 52, who held a series of low-paying jobs over the years before steady work became hard to find, said she lived out of her automobile for a year before reluctantly moving to St. John's Shelter in January.

"I'd rather be by myself. My car was my own space," she said, adding she would never consider living in a tent city.

"It wouldn't be safe, especially for a single female," said Romero, a high school dropout forced by circumstance to live in a car or shelter more than once in her life.

Her experience illustrates the complexity of homelessness in America, where the most economically vulnerable are often the first to fall through the cracks during hard times.

The latest national figures, in a January report by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, actually showed a 10 percent decline in the homeless population two years ago — from about 744,000 per night in January 2005 to nearly 672,000 per night in January 2007.

But 36 of the 50 states reported increases and homeless advocates worry that the national trend will be reversed because of the deepening recession and housing crisis.

As of 2007, the report said, 42 percent of homeless people in the United States, and 70 percent of those in California, slept on the streets, in cars, tents or abandoned buildings.

The "Skid Row" area of Los Angeles is thought to have the nation's highest concentration of homeless, with more than 5,000 counted in that 50-block area in 2007.

Experts say it typically takes six to eight months to go from losing one's home to turning up at a shelter doorstep. Some already have noticed more than a trickle.

RUN ON THE SHELTERS

"I've never seen it like this before, and I have 30 years of experience working with the homeless," said Darlene Newsom, head of the UMOM Day Centers emergency housing project in Phoenix, Arizona, where the number of homeless families seeking services has doubled in the past three months.

Loaves & Fishes, a Sacramento charity that supports the homeless, now provides a free lunch to about 650 people a day, up about 10 percent from a year ago, but private donations to the organization have been flat.

"We are struggling to keep our doors open," director Joan Burke said.

Nearby St. John's Shelter, which caters to women and children, has been running at or near capacity for months — filling roughly 100 beds a night — with a waiting list well over twice that long, case manager Kellie Dockendorf said.

This is up from the daily average of 80 women and children turned away in 2008. And getting in can take up to 45 days.

The mix of clientele is changing too, she said.

"We're getting a lot more working people. We're getting more people with education. We're getting a lot more people who are working part-time or not getting enough hours to pay

their bills," she said.

Keysia Bell, 38, had made a living as a caregiver for the elderly until full-time work became harder to find.

After a period of paying to stay with friends or relatives for weeks or months at a time, then renting a house she could no longer afford, she ended up at St. John's two months ago with her 17-year-old and 10-month-old daughters.

"I'm out of a job. I'm out of a place to stay. I have a baby daughter, and it all just became overwhelming," she said.

(Additional reporting by Tim Gaynor in Phoenix; Editing by Doina Chiacu and Mary Milliken)

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