

# More Families in the USA Are Becoming Homeless

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Largest Increases in 2008 Came in Rural and Suburban Areas, Study Finds

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Louis Gill doesn't like to turn anyone away. The director of the Bakersfield Homeless Center in California has taken to laying out cots and mattresses between the shelter's 174 registered beds to cope with the rush of homeless families brought to his doors by the financial crisis.

"Last year, we saw a 34 percent increase in homeless families and a 24 percent increase in homeless children," he said. "Why do we go beyond capacity? Because in a just society, a child should not have to sleep outside or in a car."

Gill is a frontline witness to the change in the makeup of the country's homeless. The stereotype of a homeless person as a single man no longer applies. A resident of the Bakersfield center is far more likely to be a young mother with a "good, solid job and a mortgage that she just couldn't pay."

"They're like folks you know and that you've worked with," Gill said. "Maybe the work's not there right now. Maybe they got behind on their payments. But the idea of a typical homeless person has changed. We're seeing individuals come in that have never had to access the safety net before."

Government figures support Gill's experience. The ravages of the recession, including a surge in foreclosures and unemployment approaching 10 percent, have driven thousands of families onto the streets.

Although the number of homeless individuals remained relatively stable between 2007 and 2008, the number of homeless families rose 9 percent, and in rural and suburban areas the number jumped by 56 percent, according to a report released last week by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In real terms, homelessness is still concentrated in urban areas and among adult males; 20 percent of homeless people live in Los Angeles, New York and Detroit. About 1.6 million people used an emergency shelter between Oct. 1, 2007, and Sept. 30, 2008, including 516,700 people in families.

But administration officials acknowledge that the economic crisis is turning stereotypes on their heads.

"The typical homeless person has changed to become less focused on the chronically homeless or single-individual homeless to somebody who is part of a family, whether it be a mother or a father or a child in a homeless family," HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan said. "I think what that tells us is that the economic crisis is forcing more families who had previously been well-housed into homelessness."

Women make up 81 percent of adults in homeless families, according to the report. And unlike homeless men, who are usually middle-aged, homeless women tend to be younger than 25 with children younger than 5. "The life of a homeless woman is particularly fraught with danger," said Suzanne Wenzel, a community psychologist and professor at the University of Southern California School of Social Work. "These young women are at much greater risk of being victimized when they have no stable home. It can be more difficult to obtain needed services. For anyone in this situation, it is destabilizing and extremely stressful. That's why these new figures are horrifying."

The report did not address the causes of homelessness or why some groups are disproportionately affected.

HUD's study measured changes in the number of homeless between 2007 and 2008, before the height of the economic crisis, and Donovan acknowledged that the data do not reflect "the great many more families who were living on the edge, doubling up with friends and family members, and struggling to stay out of the shelters and off the streets."

Some case studies collected by the department's Homelessness Pulse Project suggest that rural and suburban areas were particularly ill-equipped to cope with the new wave of homeless. And many of the states that experienced the largest increases in homelessness are predominately rural.

In Mississippi, the number of homeless increased 42 percent last year; in Wyoming, 40 percent; in Montana and Missouri, 23 percent; and in

Iowa, 22 percent.

"Starting about a month or a month and a half ago, our phones have not stopped ringing," said a Kentucky emergency shelter provider in one of the case studies. "We have had to turn away or refer families due to our full capacity shelter."

The department has allocated \$1.5 billion over the next three years to combat homelessness nationwide, and at the local level, there is interest in increasing resources to help women and children before they become homeless, officials said.

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