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U.S. Reports Drop in Homeless Population

By [RACHEL L. SWARNS](#)

WASHINGTON — The number of chronically homeless people living in the nation's streets and shelters has dropped by about 30 percent — to 123,833 from 175,914 — between 2005 and 2007, Bush administration officials said on Tuesday.

Housing officials say the statistics, which the [Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) collects each year from more than 3,800 cities and counties, may reflect better data collection and reporting and some variation in the number of communities reporting on an annual basis. But the officials attribute much of the decline to the "housing first" strategy that has been promoted by the Bush administration and Congress and increasingly adopted across the country.

In that approach, local officials place chronically homeless people into permanent shelter — apartments, halfway houses or rooms — and then focus on treating addiction and mental and health problems. HUD defines chronically homeless people as disabled individuals who have been continuously homeless for more than a year or have experienced at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.

Until cities and states began adopting the program, many of those people seemed to shuttle endlessly between shelters, hospitals and the street. The "housing first" strategy has begun to stabilize that population, officials say.

"We can all be encouraged that we're making progress in reducing chronic street homelessness," Housing Secretary [Steven C. Preston](#) said in a statement. "But we must also recognize that we have a long way to go to find a more lasting solution for those struggling with homelessness every day."

HUD collects the statistics as part of its Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress. The report said that 1.6 million people experienced homelessness and found shelter between Oct. 1, 2006 and Sept. 30, 2007. Individuals accounted for 70 percent of the people living in shelters during that time. The rest were families with children. About 13 percent of all homeless adults living in shelters were veterans.

Critics of the annual report often complain that it undercounts the homeless because it does not include those in precarious living situations such as families living in campgrounds or individuals doubled up with friends or relatives.

Dennis Culhane, a professor of social policy at the [University of Pennsylvania](#) and an author of this year's report, acknowledged that "there are a lot of people in tough housing situations who don't get counted." He said the government needed a standard measure and asked communities to count people living in shelters and on the street.

He described the decline in chronic homelessness as "pretty remarkable."

Mr. Culhane said that Congress and the Bush administration has pushed local communities to focus on finding solutions for the chronically homeless, who accounted for about half of the people living in the nation's shelters in 2000. HUD has financed the development of between 10,000 and 12,000 new units of supported housing targeted for that population every year over the past four years, he said.

"It affirms the very significant change in policy shift that took place over the in the last six years," said Mr. Culhane, who studies homelessness trends and policy, of the decline in the numbers of chronically homeless. "We're moving in the right direction, without a doubt." ■