

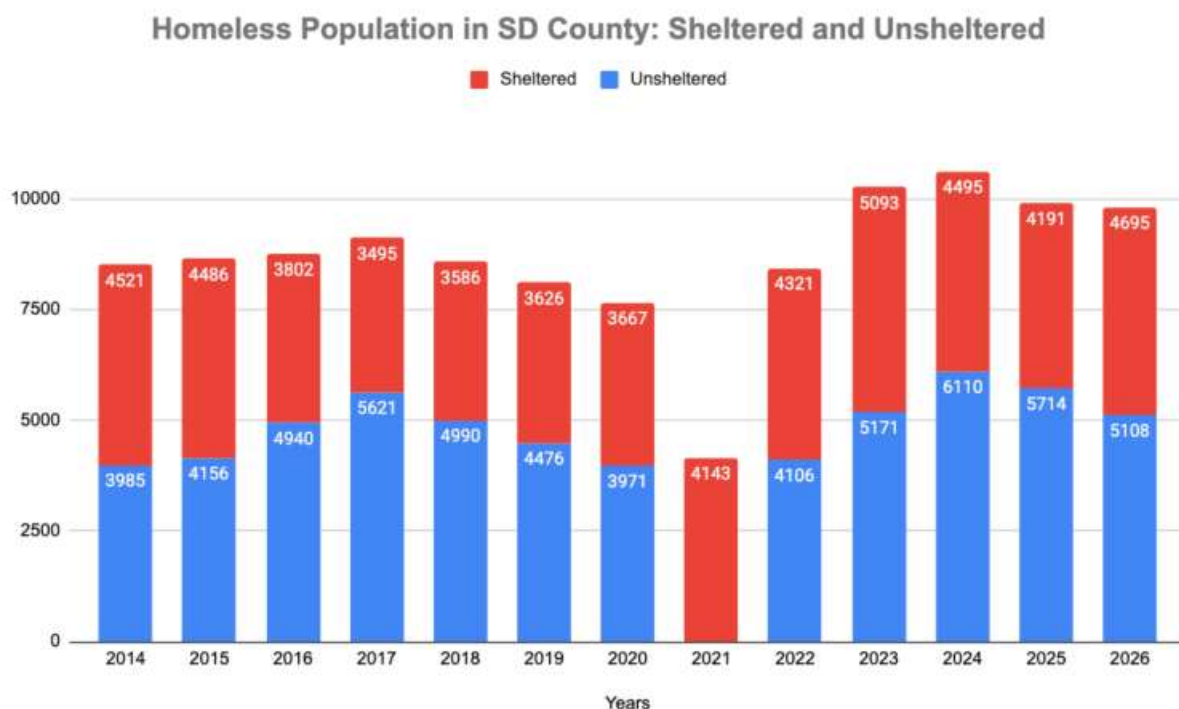
Annual homeless count shows progress in suburbs and for vets. But for seniors, results are a ‘flashing red light’

by [Thomas Murphy • Times of San Diego](#) May 1, 2026

Homelessness has declined only slightly in San Diego County, according to the results of an annual count released Friday, and shifts within the numbers offer reasons for both hope and despair.

The [2026 Point-in-Time Count](#), or PIT Count, is an annual census that tracks homelessness across America. Locally, approximately [1,700 volunteers assembled](#) at over 50 sites throughout San Diego County in late January to touch base with people where they could be found – sleeping on the streets, in shelters, cars and more.

Overall, they found that homelessness stayed almost level in 2026, with the total only falling by 1% after a 7% drop in 2025.



The total homeless population every year since the Point-in-Time Count began. Unsheltered statistics for 2021 are unknown due to disruptions from the pandemic. (Graphic by Thomas Murphy/Times of San Diego)

Yet positive developments can be found within the data. Unsheltered homelessness dropped, as shown by the 12% increase in people finding shelter. In the city’s central areas, there has been a 7% drop in people living unsheltered.

[Tamara Kohler](#) is CEO of the Regional Task Force on Homelessness, the organization that oversees the census. As a longtime resident of downtown, she finds this year's results encouraging.

"It's great to see fewer people on the streets — that's where we see the greatest vulnerability," Kohler said. "Shelter utilization increased from the mid-80s to about 92%, which is a positive. Our providers have been really intentional about filling every space. That's made a difference."

As far as the unsheltered population, 30% live in outdoor encampments, but there have been reductions in high-risk areas, such as highways. For Kohler, this indicates that targeted efforts are working.

"Where we've invested resources – whether state, federal or local – we've seen meaningful reductions," she said.

Ahead of the 2026 census, organizers were [optimistic](#) about interventions through the VA Medical Center to help homeless veterans. There has been a 12% reduction in unsheltered veterans, and a 23% increase in those who are sheltered.

San Diego is close to a "functional zero" for veterans, where the number newly experiencing homelessness matches the number gaining housing. They are connected not just to housing, but healthcare and other support services.

"Veterans have one of the most intentional and well-resourced systems to end homelessness. It's the most successful model with the greatest outcomes in the nation," Kohler said. "If we had this kind of system for every population, we would significantly reduce homelessness overall."

On the downside, though, are outcomes for seniors. More are becoming homeless, with over half experiencing the situation for the first time.

Deacon Jim Vargas, CEO of [Father Joe's Villages](#), expressed his disappointment that overall progress on homelessness has stalled and pointed to the risks for seniors.

"This year, even more seniors fell into homelessness for the first time, continuing a troubling trend," Vargas said Friday in a press release. "This is a challenge for which our community is not prepared. Today, one in three people living unsheltered are over the age of 55. As our population ages, we must act swiftly to prevent seniors from losing their homes and to provide targeted services that meet their unique needs."

A third of San Diego's unsheltered population is above age 55. California has an aging population, with many living on fixed incomes that cannot keep pace with the rising cost of living.

"They're facing not just housing challenges, but food, utilities, and medical costs," Kohler said. "We have to be really intentional about prevention. Seniors make up a large portion of the population, so focusing there can increase the numbers in a meaningful way."

The challenge for next year is funding – organizers are losing both federal and state funding, while local governments consider budget cuts. Without at least the same level of funding, Kohler foresees a struggle to make progress and restore 2025's momentum.

The city of San Diego released a statement highlighting the city's use of local, state and federal funding to achieve a 6.6% decline in unsheltered homelessness. Officials estimate that \$30 million will go towards the issue over the next year.

"The data make clear our strategy to reduce homelessness is delivering results," Mayor Todd Gloria said. "We've expanded shelter, increased access to services, and built more housing – and more people are moving off the streets and into safer, more stable situations...we'll stay focused on what works – getting people off the streets and on a path to housing."

The suburbs, though, saw sharp declines in the number of unsheltered homeless people: 11.7% in Escondido, 29.7% in Encinitas, 25% in La Mesa, 25.4% in Chula Vista and all the way up to 39.5% in El Cajon – where the total fell from 344 to 208.

That follows the 2025 results, which El Cajon mayor Bill Wells [protested](#), arguing that a 21.6% increase in unsheltered individuals was inaccurate because it included people living outside of the city limits. The map was updated to include nearby unincorporated communities, and officials adjusted the 2025 results. El Cajon's total still rose, but only by 13.07%.

San Diego Councilmember Sean Elo-Rivera, who joined volunteers in the early morning on Jan. 29, expressed mixed feelings Friday about this year's results. While a slight county-wide reduction is positive, he said, he feels like "we need to do better."

"I have significant concerns about the continuing increase in the number of seniors experiencing homelessness. That is a flashing red light on a number of fronts, from how well we are taking care of the people who are most vulnerable to becoming homeless, and the people who are most vulnerable when they become homeless," said Elo-Rivera. "It just does not speak well of how we take care of people as a society."

The mayor's proposed budget maintains funding for the [Housing Instability Prevention Program](#), which targets support for seniors, families with children and people with disabilities.

“On an issue like this, each person who is counted in that count is someone who is not having a basic need in their life met, and that's having safe, decent housing ... I think we should invest even more in prevention and diversion.”