

Study: 40% in shelters return to streets

1 in 4 in county able to move directly into permanent housing

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Among the thousands of people countywide who stayed in local homeless shelters during a recent six-year period, about a quarter were able to move directly into permanent housing, according to a new study from UC San Diego.

Yet a larger share, around 40%, went back to living outside or in a vehicle, and the odds of returning to the streets rose considerably the more times someone used a shelter bed.

Some stays lasted months. One individual spent more than 3 1/2 years in a shelter.

“Cycling through shelters to an extreme degree” shows that some people “may require more intensive interventions than are typically provided,” researchers from the university’s Homelessness Hub wrote in “Passing Through and Staying Put,” a study released earlier this year. The report recommended increasing access to supportive services and programs that prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place.

“Expanding shelter capacity and other temporary accommodations may reduce the numbers of people living unsheltered on the streets but will not sufficiently change the system’s capacity to help people permanently exit homelessness.”

The study comes as local leaders weigh how to expand the region’s overtaxed shelter system. Although Mayor Todd Gloria’s plan to place 1,000 beds in an empty warehouse collapsed, city staffers are still exploring using a downtown office building as an emergency facility and the San Diego Housing Commission voted to convert another structure in the urban core as a space for homeless women and children.

Several people from Catholic Charities, the nonprofit that will run the latter program, were downtown Tuesday to help prepare the first beds that should open up later this month. Staffers filed into the lobby, where a widescreen TV

hung by the door and a stove gleamed from a nearby dining area. “To get a building of this quality — it’s a miracle by itself,” said Vito Pajaron, the nonprofit’s CEO.

Everyone who stays at a shelter is entered into the region’s Homeless Management Information System, a database overseen by the Regional Task Force on Homelessness, and the study was based on records that omitted people’s names.

In 2018, there were about 2,200 emergency beds in the county, including inclement weather cots and hotel and motel rooms paid for by voucher programs, researchers found. That number had more than doubled by 2023, although the report said the increase was largely due to a pandemic-era expansion of those vouchers. By early last year, the total number of beds had already dropped by several hundred.

There are nowhere near enough spots for everybody asking.

More than 8,300 individuals signed up for some form of shelter from 2018 through 2023, according to the report. Most stays lasted less than a month, yet many programs don’t allow people to remain longer than that anyway. When researchers looked only at shelters that did not have time limits, the average length of stay increased to 83 days.

The vast majority of participants, 63%, reported having a disability, a broad category that can include substance and alcohol use disorders. People with disabilities were both more likely to repeatedly stay in shelters and less likely to make it into permanent housing.

About a tenth of all participants were households with children, and families generally had a better shot at landing housing than single adults. Around 13% of shelter residents were veterans. Almost a third were 55 or older.

While shelters are often not designed for elderly people, researchers found that older adults sometimes stayed longer than other age groups. This might be because they have fewer job options or smaller support networks, the study said.

A very small percentage of residents, less than half of 1%, reported being transgender or nonbinary.

Overall, the study noted that shelter systems in Los Angeles and Santa Clara counties, two areas with similarly high housing costs, were recently able to get larger shares of people into permanent housing than San Diego County. Researchers said that disparity should be studied further.

There are many reasons why someone might give up a shelter bed to go back to the street.

Christopher Ingraham, 49, sat on a downtown sidewalk Tuesday under a tarp and coat. Ingraham said he had tried staying at a local facility a year or so ago, but the staff had been hostile and his bed wasn't near a bathroom. He even broke an ankle inside. "It was horrible," he said.

His ankle continues to give him problems. Ingraham was still wearing a hospital band Tuesday from his most recent visit to the doctor. He had since found a secluded spot to sleep outside and felt the odds of him returning to a place where dozens of men packed into one large room were pretty much zero.

The study found that around 5% of shelter residents later moved into institutional settings, such as hospitals or jail.

Nearly a third left without saying where they were going. This was especially true for Black residents who, for reasons that could not be determined from the data, were less likely to tell staffers about their next steps. This made it difficult to fully explore how different racial groups experienced the shelter system, although other research has shown that Black San Diego County residents face a higher risk of homelessness.

The report is the second in a series of planned studies detailing what services are available in the region. Researchers wrote that the work was paid for by "local philanthropists who wish to remain anonymous." Jennifer Nations, the hub's managing director and an author of the study, said the effort should cost about \$300,000.