

Homeless numbers rise over 28 percent

Officials say wider count added to county's total

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TIGHTER HOUSING MARKET—A January count of Ventura County's homeless showed the number of those living on the streets, in tents, in their vehicles, in emergency shelters and transitional housing rose by more than 28 percent from the year before.

A one-day count in January of Ventura County's homeless population found 1,669 people living on the streets, in tents, in their vehicles and in emergency shelters and transitional housing, a 28.5 percent increase from 2018.

Taken on Jan. 22, the survey covered more ground than last year's tally, which could account for some of the increase, county officials said. But rising rents, a lack of affordable rentals and the impact of the Thomas fire also contributed to the rise in the homeless population, officials said.

"Each year we're getting better at conducting the count," said Tara Carruth of the Ventura County Executive Office. "We know where they are, and we're using folks who know where those target areas are. We're using law enforcement to count people in the homeless encampment, which wasn't done a few years ago."

The Thomas fire, which swept through Ventura in December 2017 and destroyed or damaged over 1,000 structures, most of them homes, created a trickledown impact on the county's housing stock as dislocated homeowners moved into rental properties, further tightening an already short supply, Carruth told the Ventura County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday.

In the 2019 count, 20 homeless people said they became homeless as a direct result of the fire's impacts, said Carruth, whose office provides staff for the county's Continuum



of Care, an umbrella agency of public and private homeless services providers and housing agencies.

Of the 1,669 homeless people counted, 30 percent said they were homeless for the first time. Of those, 20 percent said they had become homeless within the last year, she said.

“So those are people who weren’t counted in the last homeless count,” she said. “Mostly it’s rental prices and financial challenges. They lose income, or the landlord raises the rent, or they’re on a fixed income and can’t afford that increase.”

Countywide, Ventura had the highest number of homeless people, 555, followed by Oxnard with 548 and Simi Valley with 121.

In Thousand Oaks, surveyors counted 103 homeless, up from 80 last year. The spike in that city’s total may simply be an anomaly due to an abnormally low homeless count the previous year.

In 2018, the homeless count was pushed back to February due to persistent smoke from the Thomas fire. Overnight temperatures in the low 30s emptied most of the homeless encampments in Thousand Oaks where police normally find homeless people, Senior Dep. Juan Cordova, the city’s homeless outreach officer, said in January. As a result, many of the city’s homeless campers sought shelter indoors, Cordova said, and weren’t counted.

In 2017’s count, when weather didn’t drive T.O.’s homeless population indoors, 102 people in the city were homeless, just one person less than this year’s number.

Although the countywide total was up this year from the 1,299 homeless people counted in 2018, homeless populations decreased in cities in the eastern half of the county, with the exception of Thousand Oaks.

The 121 homeless people counted in Simi Valley were fewer than the 143 in 2018, and volunteers in Camarillo found 33 homeless people in that city, compared to 49 in 2018.

Moorpark’s homeless population decreased from three in 2018 to two this year. In 2017, there were seven homeless people in the city.

Countywide, surveyors found most of the homeless people were unsheltered—75 percent were living in encampments, in vehicles and on the streets.

Men made up the majority of the county’s homeless population, accounting for 1,097 of the 1,669 homeless people counted.



Despite gains in recent years in reducing the number of homeless veterans in the county, that population increased from 63 in 2018 to 102 in January, back to about the same number as in 2015, when 103 homeless veterans were counted.

The 2017 count found 80 homeless veterans; the 2016 survey counted 78.

The county also is facing an aging homeless population. This year's count found that 27 percent of the individuals who were living on the streets, in vehicles and encampments were over age 55, officials noted in the report.

To read the report, go to tinyurl.com/2019count.