

# City of Boston

## 41<sup>st</sup> Annual Homeless Census

Department of Neighborhood Development

BOSTON - April 27, 2021 - Today Mayor Kim Janey announced the results of the 41st annual homeless census. On the night of January 27, a reduced group of volunteers, including City and State officials, homeless services providers, and public health and safety first responders, conducted the City of Boston's 41st annual unsheltered [homeless street count](#). During the annual Census, the City of Boston collects data on individuals and families who are spending the night unsheltered on the street, staying in emergency shelter, transitional housing, or domestic violence shelter programs. This point-in-time count is a national requirement for cities who are receiving funds from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

This year's census required logistical modifications to maintain the health and safety of both volunteers and unsheltered Bostonians during to the COVID-19 pandemic. The protocol for conducting this year's survey followed the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Boston Public Health Commission guidance: teams were reduced in size; persons from separate households did not share vehicles while traveling to assigned survey locations; and all census takers wore masks. Due to these strictures, much of this year's census was conducted by observation and data collection rather than interview.

### Summary Data

#### City of Boston 2021 Homeless Census Summary Data

Program Type	2020		2021		% Change	
	Individuals		Individuals		Individuals	
Street Count	135		170		25.9%	
Emergency Shelter	1,593		1,176		-26.18%	
Transitional Housing	387		245		-36.69%	
<b>Subtotal: Single Adults</b>	<b>2,115</b>		<b>1,591</b>		<b>-24.7%</b>	
Families	Persons in Families	Number of Families	Persons in Families	Number of Families	Persons in Families	Number of Families
Emergency Shelter	3,900	1,240	2,863	863	-26.59%	-30.40%
Hotels/Motels	0	0	0	0	0%	0%
Transitional Housing	121	54	91	51	-24.79%	-5.56%
<b>Subtotal: Families</b>	<b>4,021</b>	<b>1,294</b>	<b>2,954</b>	<b>914</b>	<b>-26.54%</b>	<b>-29.37%</b>

Domestic Violence	Persons in Households	Number of Households	Persons in Households	Number of Households	Persons in Households	Number of Households
Emergency Shelter	56	24	56	36	0.00%	50%
Transitional Housing	NA	NA	44	12	NA	NA
<b>Subtotal: Domestic Violence</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>78.57%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,192</b>		<b>4,645</b>		<b>-24.98%</b>	

## Key Findings by Populations

### Single Adults

- Overall, the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in Boston on the night of the census decreased by 24.7 percent from 2,115 individuals in 2020 to 1,591 in 2021.
- The number of unsheltered persons staying on the street on the night of the census increased by 35 individuals, from 135 women and men in 2020 to 170 in 2021, an increase of 25.9 percent. While much of this year's count was conducted by observation in order to keep unsheltered persons and volunteer census takers as safe as possible, some individuals who were interviewed expressed a reluctance to seek shelter due to concerns about transmission of COVID-19. Additionally, like the count in 2020, the weather was above freezing on the night of the census. Very few people asked for, or accepted, rides to shelter, in contrast to 2019 when 33 persons were transported to emergency shelters on an extremely cold night.
- The number of individuals in emergency shelter on the night of the census decreased from 1,593 in 2020 to 1,176 in 2021, a decrease of 417 persons, or 26.2 percent. This reduction builds on a decrease of 274 persons the previous year. The large decrease this year is in part a result of individuals becoming more reluctant to enter shelter during the pandemic. It also reflects work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to continue to house vulnerable homeless and at-risk individuals or divert them from emergency shelter to safe alternatives whenever possible.
- The number of single adults staying in transitional housing decreased by 36.7 percent, from 387 persons in 2020 to 245 in 2021. The decrease in adults is largely due to decreases in referrals to and placements in Department of Mental Health transitional programs and transitional programs for Veterans due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as new admissions to these programs slowed so that facilities could deconcentrate their dormitories.

### Housing Homeless Individuals

Soon after the pandemic began, the City convened housing and homeless services partners to coordinate efforts to continue to house people experiencing homelessness and target resources to those most vulnerable to COVID-19. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic,

partners have continued to house, triage and divert vulnerable homeless and at-risk individuals from emergency shelter. In 2020, the City invested \$9.5M in new medium-term rental assistance to help people exit homelessness and move to permanent housing. As a result of these efforts, more than 700 individuals experiencing homelessness have been housed since the beginning of the pandemic. This includes 143 youth and young adults, 142 Veterans, and 66 people experiencing chronic homelessness.

### **Street Outreach**

In FY21, the City expanded street outreach to engage vulnerable persons in need of services in parks, plazas, and residential neighborhoods. Pine Street Inn expanded outreach in Nubian Square, Upham's Corner, Dorchester, and East Boston, coordinating with the Department of Neighborhood Development on 311 calls from residential neighborhoods. The Mayor's Office of Recovery Services and Boston Public Health Commission provide outreach, treatment, shelter, and referral to substance use treatment seven days a week in the high-use Melnea Cass and Mass Ave area, which had been seeing increased demand due to the opioid epidemic prior to COVID-19. The Boston Police Street Outreach Unit, working with many local organizations, have increased their efforts to assist unsheltered persons through diversion from involvement in the criminal justice system to emergency shelter, substance use treatment, and other behavioral health care.

### **Ending Youth and Young Adult Homelessness**

Boston's Rising to the Challenge, a collaborative community-wide action plan to prevent and end youth and young adult (YYA) homelessness in Boston launched in late 2019. The Plan identified the need to add 285 new youth housing opportunities in order to end youth homelessness by 2023. Through Federal funding, such as the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) and Emergency Solution Grant through the CARES Act, Boston has already added 177 housing units, which amounts to 62 percent of the goal. In addition, the City also committed \$1.75 million in its FY21 budget to support youth housing programs. DND is funding 82 new youth housing opportunities and is incorporating peer navigation to assist YYA in accessing housing and services. With the support of local and federal dollars, the City has created 259 total housing opportunities for youth and has reached 90 percent of its goal.

In addition to creating more permanent housing, DND and the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) have coordinated to support efforts to create safe and supportive emergency shelter options for young people during the pandemic. The City assisted Bridge Over Troubled Water to create 20 temporary shelter beds hosted by Emerson College over the summer of 2020. The MA Department of Housing and Community Development has created two new shelter sites, one located on Kneeland Street, operated by Bridge Over Troubled Waters, and the other in Roxbury, operated by The Home for Little Wanderers. Additionally, in partnership with Casa Myrna Vasquez, emergency placements in a hotel is available for young people fleeing violence. As part of that program individuals will be connected to permanent housing. Finally, The Boston

Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth (BAGLY) has begun an innovative “host homes” program, which is offering up to 10 housing units for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness.

### **Families**

- For the third consecutive year, there were no homeless families staying in Boston hotels or motels on the night of the census.
- There were no unsheltered families on the streets of Boston on the night of the census, as has been true for more than the past decade.
- The total number of homeless persons in families – homeless children and adults in all family emergency shelters and transitional housing – decreased by 1,067 from 2020 to 2021, a 26.5 percent decrease from 4,021 to 2,954 persons.
- The total number of family households in emergency shelter and transitional housing programs decreased by 380 households, from 1,294 families in 2020 to 914 in 2021.
- The number of family households in transitional housing programs decreased by 5.6 percent, from 54 to 51 households. The total number of persons in family transitional program beds decreased by 24.8 percent, from 121 women, children and men in 2020 to 91 in 2021.

### **Addressing Family Homelessness**

A variety of actions were taken during the pandemic to reduce COVID-19 spread and support families using emergency shelter. Starting in the Spring of 2020, emergency shelters reduced the number of families in group shelter settings to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Some families found housing with short term financial assistance programs, like HomeBase; other families doubled-up with friends and family as another option to leave or avoid the family shelter systems. The statewide eviction moratorium provided additional security for families to allow them to stay in place during the public health crisis. The state increased RAFT (Residential Aid for Families in Transition) and other short term flexible financial assistance programs, and the City of Boston supported households through the Rental Relief Fund by providing eligible households assistance with rental payments. These programs assisted families to maintain their housing or quickly move into new housing rather than entering shelter.

The Boston Housing Authority (BHA) formed a partnership with the Boston Public Schools (BPS) to provide up to 1,000 housing vouchers to families with BPS students experiencing homelessness. Throughout the year, BHA and BPS worked to identify and assist families with housing search and supportive services from Family Aid Boston and other local non-profits. Boston family homelessness providers, utilizing federal housing choice vouchers administered by the Boston Housing Authority in direct partnership with BPS,

housed 579 families with children experiencing homelessness since the beginning of the pandemic. An additional 648 families with school aged children were housed through BHA's partnership with Leading the Way Home, a program designed to permanently solve homelessness for families residing in family emergency shelters.

In December 2020, the City Council approved an ordinance to create the Special Commission on Ending Family Homelessness. The Commission will organize Boston's strategies to prevent and end family homelessness and drive advocacy with state systems to improve outcomes for homeless families. In FY21, the City has been recruiting an Advisor to End Family Homelessness at DND to staff the Special Commission.

### **Families in Domestic Violence Shelters**

- In 2021, there was a 50 percent increase in households in domestic violence shelters on the night of the census compared to 2020.
- At the end of 2020 a new Transitional Housing program for domestic violence victims was launched and as a result, there were 12 households in domestic violence transitional housing in Boston on the night of the census in 2021, compared to no families in 2020 or 2019.

### **Creating New Housing Opportunities for People Fleeing Violence**

The total number of households fleeing violence on the night of the Homeless Census in Boston increased by 50 percent, from 24 households in 2020 to 36 households in 2021. Throughout the year, victim services providers have been working to support households fleeing violence to develop safety plans and secure new, safe housing. During 2020, DND created 40 new housing opportunities for households fleeing violence and supported emergency hotel placements for young people fleeing violence.

### **COVID-19 Response**

With the onset of COVID-19, reducing density in emergency shelters to create physical distance and reduce the spread of this highly infectious and lethal virus was the top priority of the City of Boston. City and State agencies worked with Boston's homeless providers to identify and fund auxiliary emergency shelter sites, including college dormitories, motels and other facilities. Pine Street Inn, Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) Homeless Services, St. Francis House, Heading Home, and Bridge Over Troubled Waters stood up temporary shelter facilities across the city in Beacon Hill, Brighton, Government Center, Jamaica Plain, and the Neponset section of Dorchester to reduce congregate shelter density to safer levels and reduce COVID-19 transmission risk. The New England Center and Home for Veterans and Volunteers of America housed medically vulnerable veterans in motels to maintain safe distancing.

As Boston's many Emergency Departments, ICUs, and inpatient beds neared full capacity, Boston Health Care for the Homeless, Boston Medical Center, and Partners Health worked

with city and state agencies to increase dedicated Covid beds at Barbara McInnis House, the East Newton Pavilion, and Boston Hope Field Hospital at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center.

### **Racial Equity**

Homelessness in Boston disproportionately affects BAIPOC. Boston's general population is 25 percent Black/African American and 19 percent Latinx,<sup>1</sup> but of those who accessed homeless services in Boston in 2018, 41 percent of people were Black or African American, and 26 percent were Hispanic/Latinx. Most people stay in shelter for less than six months, and the average length of time an individual is homeless in Boston is 153 days.<sup>2</sup> A review of the data over time reveals that Persons of Color on average stay in Boston's homeless shelter system for longer periods of time than White people. However, racial groups exit to permanent housing at about the same rate.<sup>3</sup>

During the COVID-19 public health crisis, it became critical to target resources and prioritize people who meet CDC criteria for being at increased risk for COVID-19 and are staying outside or in congregate shelters that cannot follow CDC physical distancing guidance. Throughout this process, outcomes by race, ethnicity, and gender are specifically being monitored, and the City and its partners are working as a community to address systemic disparities. The Boston Continuum of Care (CoC) is committed to identifying and dismantling systemic racism in all its policies and practices with the recognition that groups of people are also marginalized based on gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, and many other factors. The ultimate goal of this ongoing work is to achieve racial equity and social justice in all homeless programs.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: 2015 American Community Survey data

<sup>2</sup> Source: Boston HMIS Data Warehouse

<sup>3</sup> Source: Boston HMIS Warehouse data, using demographic categories set by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's data standards