

Palm Beach County homeless count drops, but new state law may be a factor



The Lord's Place in West Palm Beach provides food and other services to people facing homelessness and those in need. (David Scarola Photography / Courtesy)

Palm Beach County officials on Tuesday highlighted a survey that found a significant decrease in homelessness from the year before, drawing optimism in the region's progress to help people but also some scrutiny around the findings.

The 2025 point-in-time count — a survey of the number of people experiencing homelessness in the county during a 24-hour period — found 1,520 people experiencing homelessness on Jan. 30 and Jan. 31, an overall decrease of about 28.5% compared to 2,126 people counted [the year before](#).

Why was such a significant decrease recorded this year? That's going to require research, the county stated in a news release. One contributing factor could be a [new Florida law](#) that bans outdoor sleeping and camping in public spaces.

"It is important to note that the new [Public Camping Law](#) (HB 1365) may have influenced the count to some degree, as some volunteers reported finding it more challenging to locate unsheltered individuals this year," the county said in a news release Tuesday.

Point-in-time counts are generally accepted as undercounts, usually only capturing about two-thirds of the actual population of people who are experiencing homelessness, said Matthew Marr, an associate professor of sociology at Florida International University and urban ethnographer who researches homelessness. The state law banning overnight sleeping in public places likely made it more challenging to get an accurate number of people.

“There was already a lot of criminalization of homelessness in Florida. It’s kind of ramped that up a bit,” Marr said. “You’ve always had municipalities clearing out encampments and making people move, constantly security telling people to move, and I think that’s just been accelerated.”

Now, more people experiencing homelessness are trying to become invisible to avoid any further threat of criminalization, Marr said.

“Part of being unsheltered means you constantly have to move,” he said. “That contributes to sleep deprivation. It’s harder, too, if you have medical appointments and things like that. It’s harder to get to those if you’re constantly moving. It’s also hard for street outreach to find people if they’re constantly moving.”



“We’ve worked really hard to place a lot of individuals experiencing homelessness into housing at The Lord’s Place,” said Cristina Lucier, the vice president of community programs at The Lord’s Place in West Palm Beach. (David Scarola Photography / Courtesy)

Pushing for progress

Cristina Lucier, the vice president of community programs at The Lord's Place in West Palm Beach and the chair of the Palm Beach County Homeless and Housing Alliance, participated in this year's point-in-time count. She said she believes a mixture of factors led to the decrease.

"Through local organizations, including Palm Beach County municipalities and our nonprofit, we've worked really hard to place a lot of individuals experiencing homelessness into housing at The Lord's Place," she said. "But at the same time, I think there were some factors that disincentivized or dissuaded people from participating in the survey or being more visible in the area where they may have typically resided."

Lucier attributes this to the public camping law and the recent federal crackdown on immigration enforcement, "which caused some fear among some participants for being seen in public," she said.



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An annual count

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requires what it calls "Continuum of Cares" across the nation to conduct annual point-in-time counts of people experiencing homelessness who are sheltered in emergency shelter, transitional housing and Safe Havens on a single night.

These Continuum of Cares might consist of just one municipality or a collection of them — Palm Beach County and Broward County are each considered a Continuum of Care along with West Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale, respectively, according to HUD. As of 2021, there were 27 different Continuum of Cares in Florida.

“Every year we come together with our shared belief and commitment to effectively serve residents experiencing homelessness and work toward our common goal of ensuring that homelessness in Palm Beach County is rare, brief and nonrecurring,” said Wendy Tippet, the county’s community services department of human services and community action division director, in a statement.

“We know that our work is not over, which is why we use the PIT Count numbers to make data-driven decisions on how to provide essential services to the areas most in need.”



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Lucier said conducting the counts is still important and not just because HUD mandates it. “We’re meeting the expectations of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which is a major funder of homeless programs and housing for people experiencing homelessness. So it’s really important that we meet the expectations of that department as a Continuum of Care because their support is essential to keeping people housed and ending homelessness for really vulnerable people,” she said. “It’s also beneficial to do the count every year just to get a snapshot of the trends in terms of subpopulations.”

For example, one of the counts a few years ago illustrated a rise in seniors experiencing homelessness, so Lucier said the people at The Lord's Place then knew to increase available beds and housing opportunities specifically for seniors.

In the past year, county officials opened a new 74-bed Central County Housing Resource Center, established 17 cottage homes for families and just recently [bought a hotel](#) building to transform it into a center offering affordable housing for seniors and veterans.

In Broward County, a homeless point-in-time count was conducted from Jan. 23 to Jan. 25. While HUD requires at least one day, some municipalities choose to extend the count for a longer period of time. The results will not be publicly available until April or May because the county will first send the results to HUD.