

HOMELESS IN TEXAS

Why homelessness is going down in Houston but up in Dallas

Although the view on the streets might tell a different story, Houston decreased its homeless population by 54% since 2011, according to an annual census. In Dallas, the trend is the opposite — and housing affordability might make the problem even worse.

BY [JUAN PABLO GARNHAM](#) JULY 2, 2019 12 AM CENTRAL

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Women line up outside Austin Street Center, an emergency homeless shelter in Dallas. 📷 Leslie Boorhem-Stephenson for The Texas Tribune

In the 1990s, Houston's urban core looked very different than it does today, with restaurants and coffee shops mingled among a burgeoning number of high-rise residences downtown. The city's bayous hadn't yet been beautified, with the clean biking and running trails that now wind through parks.

Back then, the bayous were a refuge for the city's homeless residents. And downtown, a multitude of organizations served food or offered beds, often without a lot of coordination with one another.



“Everybody was walking down the streets of downtown to get to the soup kitchen or to the day shelter,” Thao Costis, president and CEO of the homeless outreach organization Search, remembers. “Church groups would have clothing or a fast lunch for them. It was very reactionary to these basic needs.”

But things have radically changed. While redevelopment has maybe made homelessness more visible to the urban core's new residents, the numbers show a 54% decrease in the Houston area's homeless population since 2011. This is according to the Point-in-Time count, a census that is done at the end of each January across the country, including in 11 urban areas of Texas. Although it is extremely difficult to count the homeless community in a precise way, experts agree that this process gives a good snapshot that allows people and governments to analyze general trends, and Houston's numbers look exceptionally low.

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In the meantime, other Texas cities, like San Antonio, Fort Worth and Austin — which recently passed an ordinance [that allows sitting and camping in public](#) — are experiencing increases in the number of residents who don't have homes. And such an increase is [especially dramatic in Dallas](#), which according the 2019 Point-in-Time count, saw its homeless population surpass Houston's.

These counts can vary each year depending on how meticulously they are conducted, and some cities have experienced increases once they've perfected the methodology, like the Dallas area did in 2015. But no one denies that the rising number of homeless people is a growing problem in this city and its surrounding region.

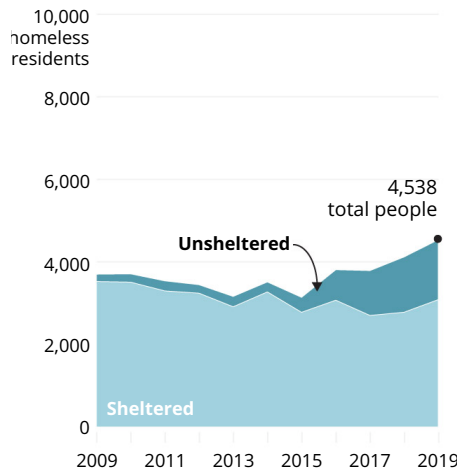
“If you look at our percentage of growth over the last three years [from 2015 to 2018], it is higher than most of the other cities in the country. It is really alarming,” said Wayne Walker, executive director of the Dallas faith-based homeless organization Our Calling. “If you see our Point-in-Time count compared today to what we had last year, Dallas has more homeless people than any city in the southern U.S. except for Phoenix.”

Sheltered and unsheltered populations

Houston’s homeless population decreased drastically around 2011, while Dallas’ has slowly but steadily increased since 2009.

HUD requires regional or local planning bodies to conduct an annual survey on a single day in the last 10 days of January to count the homeless populations in every U.S. city.

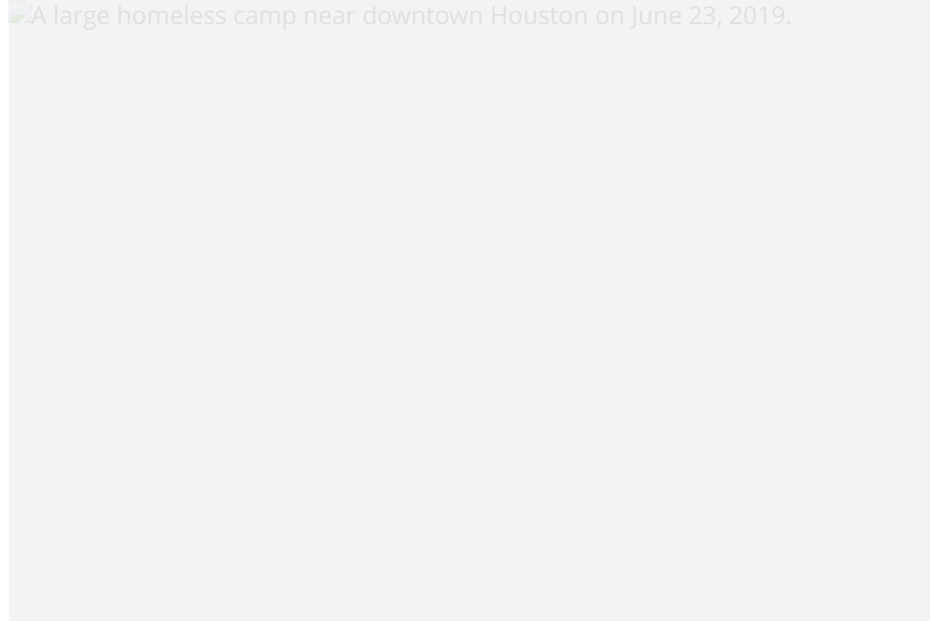
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The year before, while Dallas had counted 3,701 people on the street and in shelters, the number in Houston was 7,576. The Department of Housing and Urban Development then designated the Houston region as a priority community for assistance.

▶A large homeless camp near downtown Houston on June 23, 2019.



A large homeless camp near downtown Houston. 📷 Michael Stravato for The Texas Tribune

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“Houston was notified by the HUD that we were not doing an adequate job on homelessness,” said Mike Nichols, interim CEO of the Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County, the local continuum of care, a regional planning body that coordinates housing and services funding for homeless people. “We became a test site, with tremendous help from HUD.”

Things didn’t improve right away. In 2011, Houston reached a peak of 8,538 people in the late January count. But the wheels were rolling. The organizations involved in the issue knew they needed to get the community united around the cause. They started a plan that first focused on military veterans, a group that represents roughly 9% of the national homeless population.

Organizers decided to challenge themselves to find housing for 100 veterans in 100 days.

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At the time, it had been taking them around 220 days to find housing for a veteran. But they reached the goal of finding housing for 100 veterans in three months. The success gave them a credibility boost in the city.

“It was an early win. We got it, and then we built around that,” Costis said.

In three years, Houston would house 3,650 veterans, in [what would become a model at the national level.](#)

The change was achieved with a lot of coordination among Parker, HUD, police, businesses and about 100 organizations. Eva Thibaudeau-Graczyk, chief program officer of the Coalition for the Homeless, said the collaboration “brought new partners to the table with resources that had never been there before.”

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Among them was the Houston Housing Authority. “Prior, they’ve never seen themselves as a leader or a main partner in ending homelessness,” Thibaudeau-Graczyk explained. But since then, this agency was key, allowing the city to complement the funds for homelessness provided by HUD with the resources that were already available for affordable housing.

“This starts off with a simple dictate: The solution to homelessness is a home,” said Andy Icken, chief development officer for Turner, the current mayor. “Our focus was to create permanent supportive housing, so that we’re not continually cycling people in and out of shelters, temporary or more permanent shelters.”

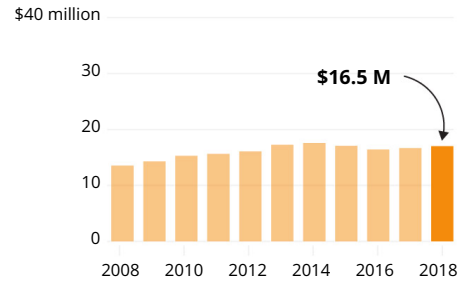
The good results translated into more funds from HUD because part of that money was tied to performance. From 2008 to 2018, Houston added more than \$18 million. To put that in perspective, in 2018, Dallas’ total funds from HUD were \$16.5 million.

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HUD funds awarded for homelessness programs

While Dallas' funding has only increased by \$3 million in 10 years, Houston's has increased by \$18 million — a sum greater than what Dallas receives in any given year.

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But there's a secret in Houston's formula: coordination.

The scenario from 20 years ago, when different organizations would serve food, give clothes or offer shelter — all done separately — has changed. There's now constant communication between these institutions and a digital database called the Homeless Management Information System, which allows people at several organizations to understand each case. Most cities today have HMIS in place, but Houston was quick to adopt it, and that helped organizations strategize, analyze, share information and find personalized solutions.

Percy Lyons in his temporary housing of four years in Houston on June 25, 2019 .

Percy Lyons has lived in a permanent supportive housing unit in Houston for four years.  Michael Stravato for The Texas Tribune

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About a decade ago, Percy Lyons arrived in Houston, hoping to live with his father.

“But his mental state wasn't right,” Lyons, now 44, said. “He turned his back on me.”

Lyons ended up living on the street. At some point, he applied for housing, but he never heard back from anyone until a police officer saw him and decided to check what had happened with his case, in collaboration with Search.

“They pulled out my information and saw everything,” Lyons said.

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Thanks to this coordinated database, officials could find out what had happened — his case was “lost in the system,” he said — and try to find a solution for him.

Now he lives in a permanent supportive housing unit.

“The difference of what is going on in Houston is its networks,” Lyons said.

The challenge of affordability in Dallas

Although Carl Falconer has worked with homeless people for more than two decades, his first Point-in-Time count in Dallas was this January. In November, he moved to Texas from Florida to become CEO of the Metro Dallas Homeless Alliance, the local continuum of care, which brings together around 85 shelters and programs in Dallas and Collin counties.

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“One thing that stuck out there that night is that people in the streets did not have a sense of hope in the system,” Falconer said. “They didn’t have any confidence that they would be out of the streets any time soon.”

It is difficult to separate this reality from the soaring Dallas real estate market, something that Houston is experiencing, but not to such intense degree. In the recently published Harvard report [The State of the Nation’s Housing](#), the Dallas metro area is mentioned as having the highest volume of home sales in 2018 (\$9.2 billion, the same as Los Angeles). But home prices there grew 42% between 2006 and 2018. Only Austin, Denver and San Francisco topped Dallas in this indicator.

“Our homelessness numbers reflect the increase in housing costs across the Metroplex,” said Daniel Roby, CEO of the Austin Street Center, one of the biggest shelters in the city.

He remembers coming to the center as a volunteer when he was 7 years old. At that time, suburban powerhouse Plano was practically grasslands. Now he says that he gets homeless people in the center from that city or other suburbs even farther out.

Hope Beaver, a complex needs case manager at Austin Street Center, speaks with an elderly client who needs to visit the Soci...

Hope Beaver, a complex needs case manager at Austin Street Center, speaks with a client. © Leslie Boorhem-Stephenson for The Texas Tribune

“Our Metroplex is massive compared to what it was then,” he said. “But we have not grown our social service infrastructure. For the most part, we have the same number of beds now that we had then. Maybe we’ve added a few hundred beds, but our Metroplex has grown 10 times over.”

According to Monica Hardman, director of Dallas City Hall’s Office of Homeless Solutions, around three quarters of homeless people are “economically homeless,” which means they fell into homelessness due to some kind of unforeseen problem, without a safety net. That includes situations like losing a job or having an unexpected health issue or an accident.

“We have not grown our social service infrastructure. ... Maybe we’ve added a few hundred beds, but our Metroplex has grown 10 times over.”

— Daniel Roby, CEO, Austin Street Center

“One of the biggest factors is the housing conditions and the housing market here in Dallas. [It] is extremely hard to find housing that is affordable, especially if you are not making a living wage,” Hardman said.

For people like Carlton Nalley, who lives near Dallas City Hall and spends most days in the Downtown Branch of the Dallas Public Library, this isn’t just about housing.

“The prices in general are going up,” said Nalley, who has been homeless since 2017, when he was released from federal prison. “Buying in the farmers market is like going to a shopping mall. You have to make three times the rent, and that will give you a small place in a neighborhood where you won’t feel safe.”

And the rapid redevelopment in the city’s urban core could exacerbate things, especially since it is arriving in areas that weren’t as highly valued before and is replacing affordable units. Then there’s another potential problem: expensive new residences’ sudden proximity to existing shelters.

“Right behind us, probably within a matter of six months, there's going to be rents of \$3,000 potentially for a one-bedroom unit,” said Rebecca Cox, chief services officer at The Bridge, one of the leading providers of homeless services in the city. “We are concerned that we are going to be seen as undesirable.”

But affordability isn't the only problem in Dallas. Institutions play a role here, too.

Roby said Houston has some governmental advantages.

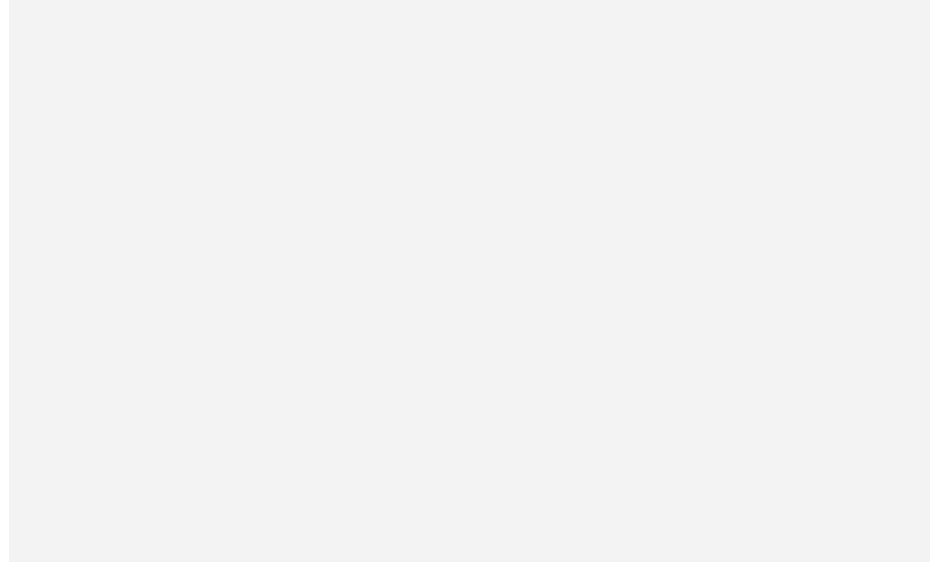
“They have a strong mayoral form of government,” he said. While in Houston, the executive power is in the hands of the mayor, in Dallas, the mayor plays a role similar to a board chairman, with a city manager directing most departments and employees. “We [in Dallas] need to collaborate to get the support here, while there, the mayor can just move on with the mayor's agenda.”


At the same time, Dallas has had issues in terms of affordable housing. In March of last year, The Dallas Morning News discovered a case of corruption in a \$825,000 contract to build and repair affordable units. HUD has been conducting audits, and the city might have to pay millions back for mismanaged funds.

Meanwhile, City Hall only got its first department dedicated to homelessness in 2017.

“For example, if there was a homeless encampment in a park, the parks department would do their best to clean it up, and they would contact the police department if there was resistance, but there was no one really there as an advocate to be able to talk to the persons experiencing homelessness, and then to be able to link them to shelter and to services,” said Hardman.

Inside Austin Street Center, an emergency homeless shelter serving Dallas, on June 25, 2019. The men's section is on the rig...



Dallas' Austin Street Center has 400 beds and meets or nears capacity every day.  Leslie Boorhem-Stephenson for The Texas Tribune

And the Homeless Management Information System, a key part of Houston's success, has had hiccups in Dallas. It's going to be changed for a third time soon, and many in the community have resisted the previous versions.

“It is exceptionally difficult to be able to have a high-functioning collaborative system when you change it so often,” said Roby.

But nothing matters if Dallas doesn't build affordable housing, Falconer said. The unsheltered homeless population increased 725% from 2009 to 2019. The sheltered

homeless population remains relatively stable because the number of beds at shelters has been the same for a long time.

“The unsheltered number is going up because the shelters are full,” Falconer said. “People don’t have anywhere to go; they can’t go to the emergency shelters, and the reason why the emergency shelters numbers remain the same is because housing is not affordable and people can’t move out of the shelter.”

Dallas needs more housing, especially what is called rapid rehousing, which includes a bed, services and financial assistance for short periods. City officials, in the meantime, have put in place a program with four tracks: They are paying a shelter \$12 per night per bed for up to 90-day stays; they have been working to create shelters for inclement weather; they got \$1.3 million in the 2019 fiscal year budget for rental subsidies and other housing assistance; and they plan to build or create 1,000 housing units over the next three to five years. For the last item, the city will be dedicating \$20 million in bond funds, and the request for developers’ interest was just released.

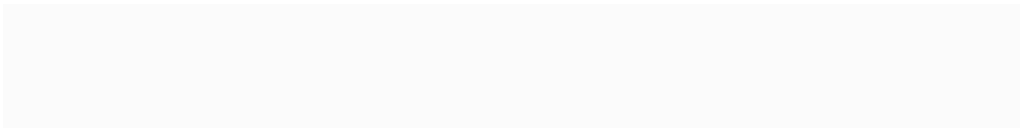
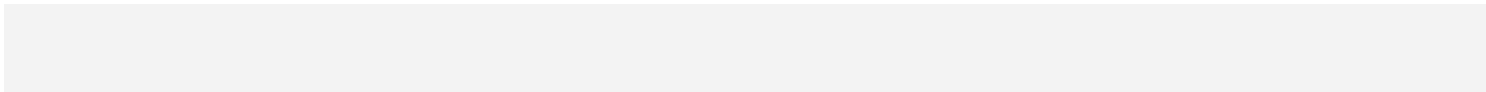
Falconer is hopeful.

“One of the things that drew me to Dallas is that I really feel this is an opportunity to end homelessness here. Not manage it, not make it a little better — end it,” he says. “The resources that we have here, the community we have here, the providers that we have here, even the programs that they’ve already set up, we have a really good structure in place.”

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