



AP Photo/Gregory Bull

In this Sept. 25 photo, a woman who was camping in downtown San Diego sorts through her belongings on a sidewalk that was being sprayed with a bleach solution to fight a deadly hepatitis A outbreak. The increased number of hepatitis cases in the homeless population and the geographic spread of the disease led California to declare a state of emergency in October.



AP Photo/Ted S. Warren

In this Oct. 30 photo, Stanley Timmings is seen through the door of the RV where he lives with his girlfriend on the streets of Seattle. Timmings was parked just north of Boeing Field, the King County International Airport, along with a group of fellow RV-dwellers who are periodically told by the city to move their vehicles — even if just across the street — or risk having them towed away.

# Amid booming economy, homelessness soars

By GILLIAN FLACCUS and GEOFF MULVIHILL  
Associated Press

SEATTLE — In a park in the middle of a leafy, bohemian neighborhood where homes list for close to \$1 million, a tractor's massive claw scooped up the refuse of the homeless — mattresses, tents, wooden frames, a wicker chair, an outdoor propane heater. Workers in masks and steel-shanked boots plucked used needles and mounds of waste from the underbrush.

Just a day before, this corner of Ravenna Park was an illegal home for the down and out, one of 400 such encampments that have popped up in Seattle's parks, under bridges, on freeway medians and along busy sidewalks. Now, as police and social workers approached, some of the dispossessed scurried away, vanishing into a metropolis that is struggling to cope with an enormous wave of homelessness.

That struggle is not Seattle's alone. A homeless crisis of unprecedented proportions is rocking the West Coast, and its victims are being left behind by the very things that mark the region's success: soaring housing costs, rock-bottom vacancy rates and a roaring economy that waits for no one. All along the coast, elected officials are scrambling for solutions.

"I've got economically zero unemployment in my city, and I've got thousands of homeless people that actually are working and just can't afford housing," said Seattle City Councilman Mike O'Brien. "There's nowhere for these folks to move to. Every time we open up a new place, it fills up."

The rising numbers of homeless people have pushed abject poverty into the open like never before and have overwhelmed cities and nonprofits. The surge in people living on the streets has put public health at risk, led several cities to declare states of emergency and forced cities and counties to spend millions — in some cases billions — in a search for solutions.

San Diego now scrubs its sidewalks with bleach to counter a deadly hepatitis A outbreak that has spread to other cities and forced California to declare a state of emergency last month. In Anaheim, home to Disneyland, 400 people sleep along a bike path in the shadow of Angel Stadium. Organizers in Portland lit incense at a recent outdoor food festival to cover up the stench of urine in a parking lot where vendors set up shop.

Homelessness is not new on the West Coast. But interviews with local officials and those who serve the homeless in California, Oregon and Washington — coupled with an Associated Press review of preliminary homeless data — confirm it's getting worse. People who were once able to get by, even if they suffered a setback, are now pushed to the streets because housing has become so expensive.

All it takes is a prolonged illness, a lost job, a broken limb, a family crisis. What was once a blip in fortunes now seems a life sentence.

"Most homeless people I know aren't homeless because they're addicts," said Tammy Stephen, 54, who lives at a homeless encamp-



AP Photo/Ted S. Warren

In this Sept. 18 photo, Taz Harrington, right, sleeps with his girlfriend, Melissa Ann Whitehead, on a street in downtown Portland. Harrington, who is in his 20s, said he met Whitehead, who was already homeless, online and came to Oregon to be with her even though he knew they would be sleeping outside. He said although he was hoping to find work, his girlfriend becomes anxious when he's away, so he stays with her most of the time.



AP Photo/Ted S. Warren

In this Oct. 12 photo, Paige Clem sits in the car she lives in along with her husband and three dogs outside a church where free food was being distributed in Everett, Wash.



AP Photo/Ted S. Warren

In this Sept. 19 photo, a person sleeps next to a wheelchair on a park bench in downtown Portland, not far from the city's trendy Pearl District.

ment in Seattle. "Most people are homeless because they can't afford a place to live."

Among the AP's findings:

- Official counts taken earlier this year in California, Oregon and Washington show 168,000 homeless people in the three states, according to an AP tally of every jurisdiction in those states that reports homeless numbers to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. That is 19,000 more than were counted two years ago, although the numbers may not be directly comparable because of factors ranging from the weather to new counting methods.
- During the same period, the number of unsheltered people in the three states —

defined as someone sleeping outside, in a bus or train station, abandoned building or vehicle — has climbed 18 percent to 105,000.

- Rising rents are the main culprit. The median one-bedroom apartment in the San Francisco Bay Area is significantly more expensive than it is in the New York City metro area, and apartments in San Francisco are listed at a higher price than those in Manhattan.

- Since 2015, at least 10 cities or municipal regions in California, Oregon and Washington — and Honolulu, as well — have declared states of emergency due to the rise of homelessness, a designation usually reserved for natural disasters.

"What do we want as a city to look like? That's what the citizens here need to decide," said Gordon Walker, head of the regional task force for the homeless in San Diego, where the unsheltered homeless population has spiked by 18 percent in the past year. "What are we going to allow? Are we willing to have people die on the streets?"

With alarming frequency, the West Coast's newly homeless are people who were able to survive on the margins — until those margins moved.

For years, Stanley Timmings, 62, and his

61-year-old girlfriend, Linda Catlin, were able to rent a room in a friend's house on their combined disability payments.

Last spring, that friend died of colon cancer and the couple was thrust on Seattle's streets.

Timmings used their last savings to buy a used RV for \$300 and spent another \$300 to register it. They bought a car from a junk yard for \$275.

Now, the couple parks the RV near a small regional airport and uses the car to get around.

They have no running water and no propane for the cook stove. They go to

the bathroom in a bucket and dump it behind a nearby business. They shower and do laundry at a nonprofit and buy water at a grocery depot. After four months, the stench of human waste inside the RV is overwhelming. Every inch of space is crammed with their belongings: jugs of laundry detergent, stacks of clothes, pots and pans, and tattered paperback novels. They are exhausted, scared and defeated, with no solution in sight.

"Between the two of us a month, we get \$1,440 in disability. We can't find a place for that," he said. "Our income is (about) \$17,000 ... a year. That puts us way out of the ballpark, not even close. It might have been enough but anymore, no. It's not."

A new study funded by the real estate information firm Zillow and conducted by the University of Washington found a strong link between rising housing prices and rising homelessness numbers. A 5 percent rent increase in Los Angeles, for example, would mean about 2,000 more homeless people there, the authors said.

Nationally, homelessness has been trending down, partly because governments and nonprofit groups have gotten better at moving people into housing. That's true in many West Coast cities, too, but the flow the other direction is even faster. And on the West Coast, shelter systems are smaller.

"If you have a disability income, you make about \$9,000 a year and renting a studio in Seattle is about \$1,800 a month and so that's twice your income," said Margaret King, director of housing programs for DESC, a nonprofit that works with Seattle's homeless.

"So everybody who was just hanging on because they had cheap rent, they're losing that ... and they wind up outside. It's just exploded."

Nowhere is that more evident than California's Silicon Valley, where high salaries and a tight housing market have pushed rent out of reach for thousands. In ever-shifting communities of the homeless, RVs and cars cluster by the dozens in the city where Google built its global headquarters and just blocks from Stanford University.

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