

U.S.

Thriving U.S. Cities Grapple With Homelessness Surge

Gentrification fuels growth in once-depressed districts, adding to pressure on shelters



Officials in San Francisco, which is hosting the Super Bowl on Feb. 7, are trying to move homeless people out of prominent areas around the planned festivities, such as the Ferry Building near Justin Herman Plaza, seen Jan. 21.

PHOTO: DAVID PAUL MORRIS/BLOOMBERG NEWS

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SAN FRANCISCO—The technology boom has rapidly gentrified some neighborhoods

here, pushing wealthy buyers and renters into once-gritty areas and generating friction over the city's entrenched homeless population. Now, tension is mounting as the Bay Area prepares to host Super Bowl 50 next month, bringing an estimated one million football fans to parts of the city where the unsheltered often congregate and sleep.

Advocates said city officials are trying to move homeless people out of prominent areas around the planned festivities—including two blocks of downtown's main thoroughfare, Market Street, and the Justin Herman Plaza near the city's Embarcadero, where homeless often congregate near the waterfront—into a new shelter. The mayor's office says it isn't planning any such move.

As once derelict or sleepy downtown districts in U.S. cities evolve into thriving hot spots, officials are grappling with what to do about homeless populations that have long inhabited them. The tension is "all over the country," said James Wright, a sociology professor at the University of Central Florida who has researched the issue. "Its major effect is just to displace them to other places in the city."

In the U.S. as a whole, the number of homeless people declined roughly 11% to 564,708 in 2015, from 637,077 in 2010, according to data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. But in several cities, the figures are growing. In New York, the homeless population increased nearly 42% to 75,323 from 53,187. In Seattle, it grew 12% to 10,122 from 9,022. HUD's figures include both sheltered homeless—those living in shelters or transitional housing—and unsheltered homeless—those living on the street, in cars or other unsuitable places.

While city officials, who often support redevelopment, face added pressure from new residents to address homelessness, advocates for the unsheltered say the response too often is to try to remove them from sight without providing adequate support.

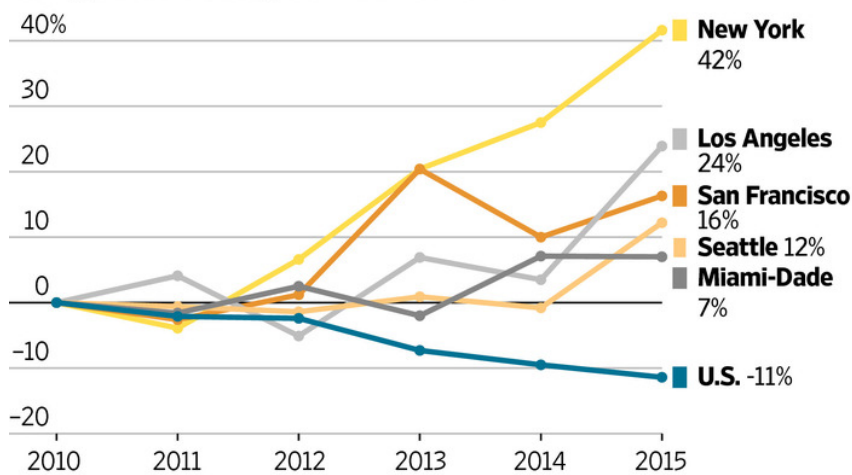
Homelessness has become a hot-button issue in recent years, and the problem has afflicted mayors across the political spectrum, said Nan Roman, president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. The mayors of New York and Los Angeles have made it a priority; Portland and Seattle declared states of emergency to tackle it. Though the roots of the clashes vary, a common theme runs through many: The conflict between established homeless populations and new residents drawn by redevelopment.

Experts say a variety of factors fuel homelessness. Incomes aren't keeping pace with rising rents in some high-price markets, and demand for affordable housing far outstrips supply, according to a 2015 study by the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. In 2013, there were only 34 affordable units in the U.S. for every 100

Seeking Shelter

The number of homeless people declined roughly 11% over the past five years, yet it is rising in some major cities.

Change in homeless persons since 2010



Source: Department of Housing and Urban Development THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

extremely low-income renters, those earning 30% of the median in the area, the study found.

Among the reasons for the shortfall: limited profit potential for developers building low-cost housing and declining federal appropriations for programs that subsidize construction of affordable units, according to the study. Federal, state and local programs aimed at securing permanent housing

for certain groups, such as veterans and the chronically homeless, have helped bring down the number of homeless people nationally, experts said.

The tension in San Francisco has led to allegations that the city is looking to move its homeless out of trendy areas. That is what “municipalities like to do when they have big events, ... try to create this fairyland where no poor people are present,” said Jennifer Friedenbach, executive director of the city’s Coalition on Homelessness.

Christine Falvey, a spokeswoman for Mayor Ed Lee, said the city has no plan for a crackdown and has stepped up efforts to end homelessness by getting people into permanent housing. Last year, the mayor received widespread criticism after issuing what appeared to sound to some advocates as an ultimatum to homeless camping downtown. Ms. Falvey said those comments were taken out of context, adding that Mr. Lee “knows people are suffering on our streets, and he wants to bring people indoors.”

In Miami, where downtown has become an increasingly vibrant area, the homeless population has crept up since 2013. The city’s Downtown Development Authority, which promotes the area, sparred last year with the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust over how best to tackle the issue.

Ronald Book, chairman of the homeless trust, said a DDA plan to provide mats for homeless people at a nearby shelter was merely an attempt to sweep them from the street—a claim Alyce Robertson, executive director of the DDA, denied. As the dispute



One of the sleeping areas with over 460 beds at the Peachtree-Pine shelter in Atlanta. *PHOTO: MELISSA GOLDEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

grew heated, the DDA created a detailed “poop map” showing where human feces, presumably from homeless people, was spotted on downtown streets.

The two sides recently reached a truce. The DDA abandoned the mat idea, and the homeless trust struck an agreement with the city and county to fund an additional 158 beds at two homeless support centers. Separately, the city and the DDA launched a mobile toilet program for homeless people, dubbed “Pit Stop,” that has reduced human waste on downtown streets by 57% in the past six months, according to the DDA.

In Tulsa, Okla., where the formerly moribund downtown has received more than \$1 billion of investment, restaurants, bars and loft apartments now dot the area. “The homeless in Tulsa are no longer out of sight, out of mind,” said Eric Costanzo, associate pastor at First Baptist Church of Tulsa, which runs service centers for homeless people in the city.

As a result of friction between business owners and homeless people, a group of city agencies, nonprofit organizations and others launched a program last year called Zero: 2016 Tulsa that aims to eliminate chronic homelessness in the city by the end of this year.

Another fight is brewing in Atlanta, where a four-story homeless shelter sits amid a building boom in Midtown and downtown that is drawing new residents and businesses. Mayor Kasim Reed has vowed to shut it down, arguing it is a magnet for drugs, disease and crime and does little to help the homeless.

Shelter board members say he is trying to push homeless people out of an increasingly chic area along Peachtree Street, the city's main drag, at the behest of business leaders. "They want us dead and gone," said Charles Steffen, one of the board members. Backers of the facility say it is serving Atlanta's most-desperate people and needs to stay open near the city center so the homeless have access to public transportation and other services.



The Peachtree-Pine shelter in Atlanta serves 575 homeless nightly on average and is facing the realities of an increasingly hostile city where property values are rising and luxury high rises are being erected a few blocks away.

PHOTO: MELISSA GOLDEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Business leaders believe the large facility should be closed and that smaller shelters more focused on providing services should be the city's answer to homelessness. "There is no support for big shelters," said A.J. Robinson, president of Central Atlanta Progress, a business group.

The fight has triggered multiple lawsuits, as the Metro Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless, which has run the facility since 1997, tries to ensure it stays open.

One recent day, hundreds of homeless people gathered in the shelter and on nearby streets. Piles of clothes and food littered the sidewalk. "It's been getting tough around here," said Rodney Quisenberry, a 53-year-old man who said he has been homeless for years because of drug addiction and depression. "You can't just close this down."

Mr. Reed is determined to do just that, using eminent domain if necessary to take control of the shelter. He said only a court order will stop him. "A judge is going to have to tell me no," he said.

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