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Mayor: L.A. 'capital of homelessness'

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By Troy Anderson, Staff Writer

Nearly 50,000 people in the city and more than 82,000 in Los Angeles County slept in a shelter or on the street in 2005, a study released Thursday found, prompting Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to call Los Angeles the nation's "capital of homelessness."

The report by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority estimated that 82,291 county residents were homeless on any given day last year, including 48,103 living in Los Angeles.

"These are staggering numbers when you think about it," Villaraigosa said. "This is the capital of homelessness in the United States of America."

"It dwarfs the homeless problem anywhere in the state, and the city of Los Angeles is ground zero for it."

The agency counted 20,023 people living downtown - mostly on Skid Row - followed by 16,787 in South Los Angeles, 11,275 in the San Fernando and Santa Clarita valleys and 9,254 in the San Gabriel Valley. The South Bay and Harbor areas had the next-highest total at 7,369.

"It's not just a downtown Skid Row problem," said LAHSA Commission Chairman Owen Newcomer.

The \$350,000 LAHSA survey also found that 221,363 people - or one in 40 people in the county - were homeless at some point in 2005.

The report marks the first attempt to gather detailed data on the homeless. The survey will be used to help officials develop strategies on how to end homelessness.

Last year, the Board of Supervisors allocated an extra \$34 million for shelter and services. Villaraigosa has committed an additional \$50 million, along with supporting a \$1 billion bond measure to develop more affordable housing citywide.

Officials also hope to use some of the \$280 million that will be generated over the next three years from the voter-approved Mental Health Services Act to provide housing and other services for mentally ill homeless people.

LAHSA, a city-county authority, has been successful in obtaining more federal funds to house the homeless, watching those dollars grow from \$47 million in 2002 to \$60 million last year.

In March, LAHSA and Bring LA Home plan to release a comprehensive plan to end homelessness in 10 years.

"The first project will probably be in downtown Los Angeles," said Mercedes Marquez, general manager of the Los Angeles Housing Department. "Housing for families that are on the edge of homelessness will be the first type of project the San Fernando Valley sees because they have lighter service needs."

Despite these recent efforts, only 12 percent of the county's homeless receive shelter on any night.

And contrary to the popular myth that homeless people from throughout the nation come to Los Angeles for its great weather, 78 percent said they had been living in the county at the time they became homeless.

"We do not have a situation where hordes are coming in from outside the county," Newcomer said. "Nearly half the homeless were renters immediately before becoming homeless. They fell on hard times."

Of the homeless, 47,813 were men, 17,543 were women, 1,088 were transgender and 19,882 were members of a homeless family.

"A number that wasn't mentioned is that there are 10,000 homeless children in the city of Los Angeles," Villaraigosa said. "Think about that."

The survey found that the typical homeless person resembles many low-income people with fragile safety nets.

In the survey, 24 percent said the loss of a job was the primary reason for their homelessness.

Of the homeless, 41 percent were black, 28 percent were white, 24 percent were Latino, 4 percent were multiracial, 3 percent were American Indian or Alaskan Native and 1 percent were Asian or Pacific Islanders.

Another study by the National Coalition for the Homeless listed Los Angeles as the nation's 18th "meanest" city for homeless people.

"I don't believe that to be true," Villaraigosa said. "Very clearly, there is a united commitment to end homelessness here."