



## Apartment rents cheaper than stays in homeless shelters

By [Marisol Belle](#), USA TODAY

Cities, states and the federal government pay more to provide the homeless with short-term shelter and services than what it would cost to rent permanent housing, the U.S. government reports.

A study of 9,000 families and individuals being released today by the [Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) finds that costs to house the newly homeless vary widely, depending on the type of shelter and social services provided by the six cities in the report.

Emergency shelter for families was the most costly. In [Washington, D.C.](#), the average bill for a month in an emergency shelter ranges from \$2,500 to \$3,700. In Houston, the average is \$1,391.

Many communities probably don't know that they are spending as much "to maintain a cot in a gymnasium with 100 other cots" as it would cost to rent an efficiency apartment, says Dennis Culhane, a [University of Pennsylvania](#) professor who studies housing policies. "We are paying for a form of housing that is largely substandard, and we are paying as much, if not more, than standard conventional housing."

He says the report bolsters a move by the Obama administration to focus on helping the homeless get permanent housing. The federal stimulus act last year set aside \$1.5 billion to prevent homelessness by helping people pay rent, utility bills, moving costs or security deposits.

Nationwide, 1.6 million homeless people received shelter in 2008, according to government figures.

The new study does not look at the cost-effectiveness or quality of the programs. Costs to shelter first-time homeless people varied based on the type of shelter and other services provided, how long they stayed and overhead. Shelters may offer drug and alcohol treatment, mental health care, family counseling and help obtaining government benefits.

Mark Johnston, deputy assistant secretary of HUD, says the report should prompt communities to lower costs by targeting people with only the services they need and to improve aid for those who repeatedly become homeless.

"We saw higher costs and longer lengths of stay than expected," he says. The longest average stay for individuals was 73 days in Des Moines. The longest average stay for families was 309 days in Washington.

"We do not want people to languish in emergency shelter," Johnston says.

Neil Donovan of the National Coalition for the Homeless says the report is limited because it covered 2004 through 2006. It doesn't include families who became homeless in the recession.

"A lot of things have become very different in the last couple of years," he says. "If it's used to a greater degree than a conversation starter, it will be used to a greater degree than it's worth."

## HOUSING THE HOMELESS

A study by the Department of Housing and Urban Development finds that the average monthly cost to house the homeless varies widely.

Individuals:

	<b>Des Moines</b>	<b>Jacksonville</b>	<b>Houston</b>
<b>Emergency shelter</b>	<b>\$581</b>	<b>\$799</b>	<b>\$968</b>
Transitional housing	\$1,386	\$870	\$1,654
Market-rate, one-bedroom apt.	\$549	\$643	\$612

Families:

	<b>Houston</b>	<b>Kalamazoo, Mich.</b>	<b>Greenville, S.C.</b>	<b>Washington</b>
<b>Emergency shelter</b>	<b>\$1,391</b>	<b>\$1,614</b>	<b>\$2,269</b>	<b>\$3,530</b>
Transitional housing	\$3,340	\$813	\$1,209	\$2,170
Market-rate rent, two-bedroom apt.	\$743	\$612	\$599	\$1,225

Source: HUD