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One-third of shelter residents are newly homeless

Josef Kuhn Religion News Service | Nov. 30, 2011

WASHINGTON -- Almost one in five clients of Christian rescue missions said they were victims of physical violence within the past year, a 6 percent jump from the previous year, according to a new survey.

"It's quite possible that the uptick in physical violence ... is due to a friend or family member's feeling of desperation and helplessness accompanying their unemployment and underemployment," said John Ashmen, president of the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions (AGRM).

The Snapshot Survey of the homeless is conducted annually by AGRM, North America's oldest and largest network of independent homeless shelters and rehabilitation centers.

Almost 19,000 individuals took the survey in October at 114 rescue missions; 17 percent of those surveyed were not currently homeless, but all had received services offered at the missions, such as food and medical care.

Although a quarter of those surveyed said they had been homeless three or more times before, an even higher figure -- 35 percent -- said they had never before been homeless.

Bill Roscoe, director of Boise (Idaho) Rescue Mission, said his shelter housed more than 2,000 people in the past year who had never been homeless before.

"We've seen quite a significant increase in numbers with women and children. In two years the average daily population in our women and children?s shelter more than doubled," Roscoe said.

Aside from the increases in reported violence and numbers of women and children, the survey found that 80 percent of those using the rescue missions preferred receiving assistance from an agency with a spiritual emphasis.

"Unfortunately, nothing in the report is a huge surprise," Ashmen said. "Some public figures like to give the impression that government programs are curbing homelessness and hunger. We certainly aren't seeing it."

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