

Student homelessness levels off

Economy | Nearly 16,000 statewide lack a home, but that's not a jump from 2007; numbers rose in rural areas

By **BETSY HAMMOND**
THE OREGONIAN

Homelessness among Oregon students has leveled off, with nearly 16,000 students who attended Oregon public schools last year lacking a home at some point during the school year, a new report shows.

Figures released by the Oregon Department of Education on Wednesday show homelessness among schoolchildren dropped in some parts of the state, including Portland, Beaverton and Hillsboro, but increased in others, including Woodburn, east Multnomah

County and scores of rural communities in all parts of the state.

That reflects low-wage families' desperate search for affordable housing, as

they move from high-rent places such as Portland and Beaverton to cheaper outlying areas — yet many still find themselves unable to afford the rent at

some point, said Beth Kaye, public affairs manager for the Portland housing bureau.

With mortgages now harder to secure, more families are remaining renters longer, driving up rents and pricing out those who work for the minimum wage or just above it, she said.

“As a parent, when I think about an elementary school child who doesn't have a place to call home, it's just shameful, it's heartbreaking,” Kaye said.

Dona Bolt, Oregon's coordinator for homeless education, said she was pleasantly surprised that the number of homeless students didn't shoot up again this year, given high unemployment rates and other economic problems.

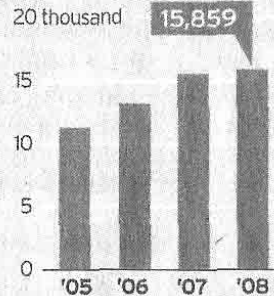
She and other officials who work on

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Homeless students

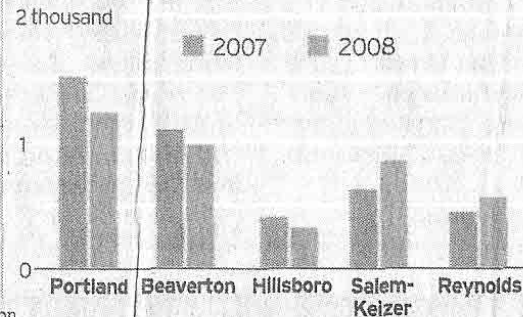
Oregon students without a permanent home of their own.

Statewide



Source: Oregon Department of Education

Changes by school district



MICHAEL MODE/THE OREGONIAN

Homeless: Medford has the highest rate for its size

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homelessness said they believe programs launched to help homeless families may have helped stabilize the numbers of students without homes.

Several cited the Bridges to Housing program, which gives high-needs homeless families subsidized housing and customized support services. It has helped 125 families, including several hundred children, get into permanent homes in the past year and a half, according to Janet Byrd, executive director of the Neighborhood Partnership Fund, which administers

Oregon's homeless students

- There are more than 1,000 in every grade.
- More than 11,000 are "doubled up" living in a relative or friend's home
- 2,800 are "unaccompanied" – minors who have been kicked out of or have run away from home
- Nearly 2,000 live in tents, garages, mobile homes that lack utilities or in other substandard housing
- 1,800 live in shelters
- Nearly 1,000 live in motels

Source: Oregon Department of Education

Bridges to Housing. It operates in Washington, Clackamas, Multnomah and Clark counties.

But communities including Woodburn, Medford, Coos Bay and parts of east Multnomah County continue to have 5 percent to 10 percent of their students living with relatives, in cars, in shelters or in trailers without heat or water because the families can't afford a decent home.

Medford once again reported the highest rate of homeless children and youth of any big school district in the state. The

southern Oregon district reported that 1,100 of its students, representing nearly one-tenth of its enrollment, lack homes of their own.

"We are in hard economic times. There is just no way around that," said Barbara Rommel, superintendent of David Douglas schools in outer east Portland, which reported a 16 percent increase in homeless students.

Schools are required to count as homeless any student who lacks a sturdy permanent home, including those whose

families move in with friends or relatives for economic reasons; families who live in tents, garages or trailers without running water or electricity; families who live in motels; and those in homeless shelters.

Every school district is required to name a liaison to help homeless children stay connected to school and on track in class despite the upheaval in their living situations.

Oregon schools Superintendent Susan Castillo said the yearly report on homeless students is important because "it shines a light on students who need extra support to overcome barriers to their success."

Byrd agreed it should help crystallize attention on the issue. "We know every child needs a home to succeed in school and in life. I want to see these numbers drop."

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