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Los Angeles homeless dying at rate of one a day

The Associated Press

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LOS ANGELES—Virgil Brown was a Vietnam War veteran, a volunteer, a husband and a father.

He was also addicted to drugs and homeless. For a time he sobered up, but Brown eventually relapsed and was discovered dead of an overdose in early 2005 on the streets of Skid Row.

"He fought for his country at a time when nobody was sure we were doing the right thing. When he came home, he couldn't find any relief," said Anthony Belcher, an outreach supervisor at New Directions Regional Opportunity Center where Brown sought help. "Yes, he had demons. But we as a nation failed him."

Brown is just one of 2,815 homeless people who have died in Los Angeles County since 2000, according to the first study of its kind by the Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger & Homelessness. On average, one homeless person dies every day in the county, according to the report.

The study was based on coroner's records and is being formally released Friday, which is designated as National Homeless Memorial Day. The report comes as county efforts to institute a wide-ranging and comprehensive homeless shelter program have moved slowly amid funding and other complicating factors.

The average age of those found dead was 48, about 36 percent younger than the average lifespan. Almost half the deaths were caused by cardiovascular disease coupled with substance abuse.

Nearly one in five were killed violently as victims of homicide, suicide or other trauma.

"The human cost of the tragedy of homelessness in the richest country in the history of the planet is illustrated by these statistics," said Torie Osborn, senior adviser to Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

"And it's heartbreaking. I think it just shows we have a long way to go to step up and take care of our most vulnerable citizens. I mean to die alone and on the streets - what could be a sadder Christmas?"

The report notes that while Los Angeles County is the "homeless capital of the nation," with an estimated 73,000 homeless, only 17 percent of the county's homeless find shelter. This is the lowest percentage of any major metropolitan area in the nation.

The report contains recommendations for the city and county to deal with the situation, including making permanent housing options for the homeless a regional priority.

Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of the coalition called many of the deaths preventable.

"With no resources and forced to live outside, in their cars and in abandoned buildings, it's no wonder that hundreds of homeless people die without dignity in our community every year," he said. "This is just shameful."

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