

Fresno one of nation's neediest large cities, study shows

By Tim Sheehan



A homeless woman tries to stay dry during a rainstorm in Fresno last winter. The city's percent of homeless people is one measure used to determine Fresno's people in need.

JOHN WALKER — The Fresno Bee [Buy Photo](#)

Fresno has one of the highest proportions of people in need among large American communities, according to an [analysis by WalletHub.com](#).

The city ranked 147th out of the 150 largest cities in the United States in an analysis of data for a range of different economic and social factors. The lower the ranking, the worse off a city is in the survey.

The proportions of Fresnoans who are in poverty or homeless, unemployed and on public assistance weighed heavy on the city's ranking, which is largely based on data from 2013. Under the information considered by WalletHub, Fresno's unemployment rate of 12.1% (reported in December 2013) ranked 146th out of 150 cities — the same ranking as the 9.8% of households in which families receive some form of public assistance such as welfare or food stamps.

Only 11 metropolitan areas had higher poverty rates than Fresno, where the number of residents under the poverty line was estimated at 31%. And Fresno's estimated homeless rate of 0.56% ranked it at 123rd out of 150 cities, according to WalletHub, an online project that analyzes economic data and provides financial news to consumers.

The overall rankings also considered indicators such as non-business bankruptcy filings, school dropout rates, the

percentage of households without health insurance, food insecurity rates, crime rates, and proportions of homes or apartments without complete plumbing or kitchen facilities. Nationally, the South Dakota capital of Sioux Falls ranked as the city with the lowest population in need, followed by Overland Park, a suburb of Kansas City, Kansas; Madison, Wisconsin; Plano, Texas; and Lincoln, Nebraska.

Detroit, Mich.'s embattled center of the American automobile industry, was at the bottom of the 150-city list. Rounding out the bottom five were Jackson, Miss.; Memphis, Tenn.; Fresno; and Mobile, Ala.

Mark Standriff, the city's director of communications, discounted the WalletHub report for using old data that he said no longer reflects Fresno's current reality.

"We've seen studies like this before that use old and dated information to make conclusions without any context," Standriff said. "Instead of focusing on a faded snapshot of Fresno's past, we're more interested in the news of Fresno's continued recovery. Unemployment is at pre-recession lows, our economic outlook is improving daily and our efforts to end chronic and veterans homelessness by the end of 2015 are recognized nationally."

"We may still have our challenges, but Fresno is definitely moving in the right direction," he added.

Leaders of local nonprofits, however, say a strong need continues to exist in Fresno for a range of the social services they offer, from help with food and clothes for families to hot meals and temporary shelter for the homeless. Cruz Avila, executive director of the [Poverello House](#) on F Street near downtown Fresno, said that the demand for services varies from month to month, increasing substantially during the winter. Even with those variations, however, "the need is bigger this year than last year," he said. "Our numbers have doubled this year on certain services that we provide."

While homelessness, poverty and hunger persist in Fresno, Avila said there is now a concerted effort between nonprofit organizations including Poverello House, the [Fresno Rescue Mission](#), [Catholic Charities](#) and the [Fresno Housing Authority](#) to collaborate on the issues instead of working in isolation.

"We're in a transition phase now, where we're all starting to work together," Avila said. "But it's not going to happen from one day to the next."

At the same time, some nonprofits continue to experience hardship with a decline in the contributions on which they rely to do their work. In its most recent Internal Revenue Service filing, covering the 2012-13 fiscal year, the [United Way of Fresno County](#) received contributions and grants amounting to just over \$1.5 million, down from almost \$1.7 million in 2011-12. The United Way routes contributions to about 80 community organizations and also has its own programs aimed at emergency food and shelter, financial literacy, education and health services.

Donations are also down this year at the Poverello House, Avila said.

"Last year was an amazing year for donations," he said. "What we're seeing now is that donations are a little lower than in the past. You still have those loyal donors and folks who are still donating to nonprofits, no matter what organization it is and where their heart is at. But we have a huge need and with lower donations, we're having to dip into our reserve to purchase items that are needed for people."

The WalletHub report on need comes following a study on charitable giving issued in October by the [Chronicle of Philanthropy](#). That study, which evaluated 2012 Internal Revenue Service data on tax deductions for charitable contributions, reported that nationwide, "the wealthiest Americans are giving a smaller share of their income to charity, while poor and middle-income people are digging deeper into their wallets."

A similar phenomenon was evident in Fresno County, where residents who itemized their tax deductions contributed an average of 2.9% of their incomes to charity. According to the [Chronicle of Philanthropy data](#), people whose income was \$25,000 a year or less donated a combined total of almost \$8.8 million to charity. Among those with the highest

incomes — people who made \$200,000 or more — total contributions amounted to almost \$102 million.

But as a proportion of their income, those with the lowest incomes gave almost 7% of their income — about \$69 for each \$1,000 they made — compared to 2.6%, or \$26 for every \$1,000 of income, for those in the highest income bracket.

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