



A man finds floor space anywhere he can in the lobby area of the Calgary shelter.

Photograph by: Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald

CALGARY - Two new reports show the economic slowdown is hitting Calgarians hard, with thousands of people losing their jobs and hundreds becoming homeless during the past year.

The Calgary Homeless Foundation, which surveyed the number of people using shelters over a one-week period in July, estimates the number of homeless in the city has grown by almost 13 per cent--to 4,581, up 521 people since an official City of Calgary count in 2008.

"It's economic," said foundation president Tim Richter. "We're seeing the recession hit the most vulnerable."

Although it isn't an official count, Richter said the data will determine whether there's enough shelter space for homeless people this winter.

Ron, a client at the Calgary Drop-In Centre who asked his last name not be published, said he turned to the shelter after his work as a contractor dried up four months ago.

"You can put out a ton of resumes, and even with four journeyman tickets, I am struggling to get a job right now," he said, noting the labour situation is starting to improve. "It's picking up, there are still jobs available in the drywall sector, but you have to do your homework and you have to do the legwork."

The drop-in centre, Calgary's largest shelter, has been operating at or near capacity this year, and the staff has noticed an increase in the number of former clients returning.

Lately, Ron said there have been more newcomers at the shelter.

"You are starting to see a lot of people now who have had regular jobs, they've worked three or four years at the same place and they've been let go," he said. "They're here now."

Details on the number of homeless Calgarians came the same day as an analysis by Vibrant Communities Calgary which crunched Statistics Canada data for the past year to determine that men over 20 have seen net job losses of 16,500 since July 2008.

By comparison, there has been a net increase of 3,700 women who have started working in the past year -- likely because they are finding employment in lower-paid jobs.

"The sector that is growing the fastest is that sales and services sector, where women tend to be hired," said Sarah Newman, project co-ordinator with Vibrant Communities Calgary.

"We're losing well-paid, male-dominated jobs in the construction and manufacturing sector."

As a result, she said, families are increasingly relying on women's lower wages to make ends meet.

"Many families are probably living on less and potentially having to access these already-strained human service agencies-- even though they are working," said Newman.

"So they are accessing the food bank or potentially unable to pay their mortgages and becoming homeless."

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