

Too many faces of homelessness

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The cost of homelessness -- of battling it as a society, of living it as an individual or family -- was very much in the news on Friday.

Readers of *The Star* learned that the annual homeless count in Indianapolis rose this year despite a number of successful efforts to get residents safely housed.

They also learned, in the report on 61-year-old Stephen McGuire, that living on the streets can be worse than miserable.

Arrests have resulted from what police say was a gang beating that killed the chronically homeless man in his nest behind a Downtown hotel. Advocates for the homeless say his slaying reflects a national phenomenon, with nearly 300 street people murdered since 1999.

Those crimes, and those victims, represent the extremes of homelessness. More typical are persons, including families with children, who wind up in shelters or borrowed quarters for lack of money due to lost jobs, illness without insurance and other calamities far removed from the addictions and mental health issues that afflict many so-called street people. Some 3,000 public school pupils in Marion County are classified as homeless.

Measures to help all categories of the homeless and near-homeless have been created and ramped up in recent years, most notably the federal stimulus program that infused \$3.9 million into Indianapolis. The federal money is aimed at the largest contingent, those hit with foreclosures or evictions despite following society's rules.

"They've lived paycheck to paycheck, because they had to," says Timothy Joyce, executive director of the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention. "Then they lose their job, and there is no other job."

Certainly, it is a grim time for marginal jobseekers. The ranks of people with felony convictions among the homeless rose 30 percent, Joyce notes, indicating that employers had too many applicants for too few openings to take chances.

For all the homeless, the latest count would be much higher without various support programs, Joyce says, adding that only a rising economic tide will cut into the statistics. Indiana University data show the metropolitan area lost 53,000 jobs between 2007 and late 2010, and the official end of the recession has not impacted the unemployment rate.

The bottom line: Homelessness will be with us to an intolerable degree for some time. Government and private philanthropy must continue pushing back directly against it while promoting the natural forces necessary to make a sea change. Housing, after all, is a basic right -- and, as we have sadly seen, it can be a vital need.