

The homeless

Psychology, Psychotherapy



Children" shealthMany people call or write the NationalCoalitionfor the Homeless to ask about the number of homeless people in the United States. There is no easy answer to this question, and in fact, the question itself is misleading. In most cases, homelessness is a temporary circumstance -- not a permanent condition. A more appropriate measure of the magnitude of homelessness is therefore the number of people who experience homelessness over time, not the number of " homeless people. "

Studies of homelessness are complicated by problems of definitions and methodology. This fact sheet describes definitions of homelessness, methodologies for counting homeless people, recent estimates of homelessness, and estimates of the increase in homelessness over the past two decades. Additional resources for further study are also provided. As a result of methodological and financial constraints, most studies are limited to counting people who are literally homeless -- that is, in shelters or on the streets.

While this approach may yield useful information about the number of people who use services such as shelters and soup kitchens, or who are easy to locate on the street, it can result in underestimates of homelessness. Many people who lack a stable, permanent residence have few shelter options because shelters are filled to capacity or are unavailable. A recent study of 30 U. S. cities found that in 1998, 26% of all requests for emergency shelter went unmet due to lack of resources (U. S. Conference of Mayors, 1998).

In addition, a review of homelessness in 50 cities found that in virtually every city, the city's official estimated number of homeless people greatly exceeded the number of emergency shelter and transitional housing spaces (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 1999). Moreover, there are few or no shelters in rural areas of the United States, despite significant levels of homelessness (Aron and Fitchen, 1996). As a result of these and other factors, many people who lack permanent housing are forced to live with relatives and friends in crowded, temporary arrangements.

People living in unstable housing arrangements who lack a permanent place to stay are experiencing a kind of homelessness, but because they are not "literally homeless," they will not be counted. Researchers use different methods to measure homelessness. One method attempts to count all the people who are literally homeless on a given day or during a given week (point-in-time counts). A second method of counting homeless people examines the number of people who are homeless over a given period of time (period prevalence counts).

Choosing between point-in-time counts and period-prevalence counts has significant implications for understanding the magnitude and dynamics of homelessness. The high turnover in the homeless population documented by recent studies (see below) suggests that many more people experience homelessness than previously thought, and that most of these people do not remain homeless. Because point-in-time studies give just a "snapshot" picture of homelessness, they only count those who are homeless at a particular time. Over time, however, some people will find housing and

escape homelessness while new people will lose housing and become homeless.

Systemic social and economic factors (prolonged unemployment or sudden loss of a job, lack of affordable housing, domestic violence, etc.) are frequently responsible for these episodes of homelessness. Point-in-time studies do not accurately identify these intermittently homeless people, and therefore tend to overestimate the proportion of people who are chronically homeless -- particularly those who suffer from severe mental illness and/or addiction disorders and who therefore have a much harder time escaping homelessness and finding permanent housing.

For these reasons, point-in-time counts are often criticized as misrepresenting the magnitude and nature of homelessness. There is another important methodological issue that should be considered.

Regardless of the time period over which the study was conducted, many people will not be counted because they are not in places researchers can easily find. This group of people, often referred to as " the unsheltered" or " hidden" homeless, frequently stay in automobiles, camp grounds, or other places that researchers cannot effectively search.

For instance, a national study of formerly homeless people found that the most common places people who had been literally homeless stayed were vehicles (59. 2%) and makeshift housing, such as tents, boxes, caves, or boxcars (24. 6%) (Link et al. , 1995). This suggests that homeless counts may miss significant numbers of people who are literally homeless, as well as those living in doubled-up situations. There are at least four widely used

national estimates of homelessness. Many are dated, or based on dated information. For all of the reasons discussed above, none of these estimates represents " how many people are homeless.

The most widely cited example of a point-in-time estimate is the approximately 500, 000-600, 000 homeless people found in shelters, eating at soup kitchens, or congregating on the street during one week in 1988 (Burt and Cohen, 1989). 700, 000+/night; 2 million/year (1999) The 500, 000-600, 000 estimate is sometimes updated by using a projected rate of increase of 5% a year to produce an estimate of over 700, 000 people homeless on any given night, and up to 2 million people who experience homelessness during one year (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 1999).

In 1990, a national telephone survey identified formerly homeless people and produced life-time and five-year prevalence estimates of homelessness. Seven percent of the respondents reported that they had been literally homeless at some point in their lives, and three percent reported being homeless at some point between 1985-1990 (Link et al. , 1994). The Clinton Administration's Priority Home! The Federal Plan to Break the Cycle of Homelessness uses this data, corrected to include children, to estimate that between 4. 95 million to 9. million people (with a mid-point of 7 million) experienced homelessness in the latter half of the 1980s.

A second study was undertaken in 1994 to refine the analysis with more explicit definitions and detailed information. This study found that 6. 5% (12 million adults nationwide) of the respondents had been literally homeless at

some point in their lives, and that 3.6% (6.6 million adults nationwide) of the respondents had experienced homelessness (literal or doubled up) between 1989-1994 (Link et al. , 1995). Thus, it appears that 12 million of the adult residents of the U. S. ve been literally homeless at some point in their lives.

Dennis Culhane's study of turnover rates in shelters in New York City and Philadelphia is another example of a period prevalence count. This study revealed that 3% of Philadelphia's population used the public shelter system between 1990 and 1992, and that in New York, 3% of the population received shelter between 1988-1992 (Culhane et al. , 1994). The Culhane study also found that in New York City, a single shelter bed accomodates four different people in the course of a year; in Philadelphia, each bed accomodates six different persons per year.

Because this study did not include persons in privately funded shelters or on the streets, the findings underestimate homelessness in both cities. A study by Martha Burt compared these rates with data from seven other jurisdictions (Burt, 1994). The comparison showed that the New York City and Philadelphia rates fall well within the range of data from other regions of the country. One limited measure of the growth in homelessness is the increase in the number of shelter beds over time.

A 1991 study examined homelessness " rates" (the number of shelter beds in a city divided by the city's population) in 182 U. S. cities with populations over 100, 000. The study found that homelessness rates tripled between 1981 and 1989 for the 182 cities as a group (Burt, 1997). A 1997 review of

research conducted over the past decade (1987-1997) in 11 communities and 4 states found that shelter capacity more than doubled in nine communities and three states during that time period (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1997). In two communities and two states, shelter capacity tripled over the decade.

These numbers are useful for measuring the growth in demand for shelter beds (and the resources made available to respond to that growth) over time. They indicate a dramatic increase in homelessness in the United States over the past two decades. By its very nature, homelessness is impossible to measure with 100% accuracy. More important than knowing the precise number of people who experience homelessness is our progress in ending it. Recent studies suggest that the United States generates homelessness at a much higher rate than previously thought. Our task in ending homelessness is thus more important now than ever.

The National Coalition for the Homeless provided leadership in the successful effort to pass the Stewart B. McKinney Homelessness Assistance Act in 1987. Since then, NCH has continued to monitor the reauthorization and appropriations process for McKinney Act programs and other programs affecting poor and homeless people. NCH supports legislation to provide an adequate supply of affordable housing, jobs which pay a living wage, and universal access to health care. Legislative Alerts Learn about homelessness-related legislation being considered by Congress and what you can do about it.

General Homelessness Issues NCH's 2000 Federal Legislative Agenda This document provides an overview of NCH's federal legislative priorities for 2000, including housing, health, education, income, and civil rights. The McKinney Act The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act was the first -- and remains the only -- major federal legislative response to homelessness. This fact sheet provides a brief history of the McKinney Act, describes its content and evolution, and summarizes recent trends in McKinney Act legislation and funding.

Funding and Budget Issues Appropriations for Federal Homeless Programs Table of FY95-00 funding levels for homeless programs. FY2001 Budget and Homelessness This page summarizes the most recent budget and appropriations legislation and provides NCH's recommended funding levels for federal homeless programs. Housing and Shelter Issues Community Housing Investment Trust Discusses key provisions of an NCH-sponsored initiative to create one million units of high-quality, affordable rental housing for persons whose annual incomes are less than the minimum wage, including persons with disabilities, elder age, or low-wage incomes.

McKinney Side by Side Side by Side comparison of major components of proposals to amend HUD homeless legislation (July 2000). Housing and Welfare Reform: Background Information Prepared by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, this paper explores the impact of welfare policy on housing and the impact of housing policy on welfare. Welfare Issues Welfare to What: Early Findings on Family Hardship and Well-Being Published by the Children's Defense Fund and the National Coalition for the Homeless in

November 1998, this report examines the impacts on families two years after the signing of the federal welfare law.

It presents national and local findings and compiles more than 30 state and local studies. The Executive Summary is available at <http://nch.ari.net/w2wexec.html>. The full report may be downloaded below. Welfare to What (Full Report - 246K) Note: To view this file, you will need Acrobat Reader. Using TANF to Reduce and Prevent Homelessness: Effective Practices and Strategies. Published in May 2000, this paper was written to provide specific examples of how states and communities have used TANF productively to reduce and prevent homelessness.

Other Internet Resources on Welfare and Poverty Links to online organizations and sources of information on poverty and welfare. Education Issues School Segregation and Homeless Children and Youth This overview summarizes available information on integrated homeless education programs (those programs that help homeless children enroll, attend, and succeed in mainstream schools) and segregated classrooms or schools (those that separate homeless children from housed children on the basis of their homelessness alone).

For more detailed information, including program examples, please see School Segregation and Homeless Children and Youth: Questions and Answers Reauthorization of the McKinney Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program Congress will consider legislation to reauthorize the McKinney Act's Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY)

program in 1999. The EHCY program works to ensure homeless children and youth's enrollment, attendance, and success in school.

This page provides up-to-date information on reauthorization for advocates, teachers, service providers, and administrators, including analyses and summaries of reauthorization legislation, links to relevant committees, and more detailed action alerts. America's Homeless Children: Will Their Future Be Different? A Survey of State Homeless Education Programs The McKinney Act is responsible for significant improvements in homeless children's access to public education.

However, increasing homelessness among families with children and a simultaneous reduction in federal funding threatened the progress that states and communities had made in helping homeless children and youth enroll, attend, and succeed in school. This 1997 40-state survey examines the accomplishments and challenges of homeless education programs faced with increasing demand for services and decreasing resources.

Making the Grade: Successes and Challenges in Educating Homeless Children and Youth The 1996 Position Document of the National Association of State Coordinators for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. This report summarizes the history and progress of efforts to educate homeless children and youth, profiles 30 selected state homeless education programs, and offers recommendations for improving the McKinney Education for Homeless Children and Youth program.

Health Issues No Open Door: Breaking the Lock on Addiction Recovery for Homeless People This NCH report examines what has been learned in the last decade about the barriers that homeless people face in accessing addictive disorder services and the treatment and recovery interventions that are effective with the homeless population. The Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH) Program Describes the function and accomplishments of the McKinney Act's Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH) program, as well as NCH's recommendations for expanding and strengthening PATH.

Homeless Treatment and Recovery Competitive Grant Program Describes NCH's initiative to reauthorize and appropriate funds for a national competitive grant program to develop and expand addictive and mental disorder treatment and recovery opportunities for homeless persons with addictive and mental disorders Increased Demand, Decreased Supply: Challenges to the McKinney Act's Health Care for the Homeless Program Changes in the health care marketplace, in public policy, and in the face of homelessness itself are creating new demand for health services for homeless people according to this study published by the National Health Care for the Homeless Council and the federal Bureau of Primary Health Care.