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How Many People Experience Homelessness?

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Many people call or write the National Coalition for 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 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.

DEFINITIONS

As a result of methodological and financial constraints, most studies are limited to counting people who are 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 24 U.S. cities found that in 2005, 14% of all requests for emergency shelter went unmet due to lack of resources. For families, the numbers are even worse: 32% of emergency shelter requests from families were denied (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). 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, 2004). Moreover, there are few or no shelters in rural areas of the United States, despite significant levels of homelessness (Brown, 2002). As a result of these and other factors, many people in homeless situations are forced to live with relatives and friends in crowded, temporary arrangements. People in these situations are experiencing homelessness, but are less likely to be counted. For instance, of the children and youth identified as homeless by the Department of Education in FY2000, only 35% lived in shelters; 34% lived doubled-up with family or friends, and 23% lived in motels and other locations. Yet, these children and youth may not immediately be recognized as homeless and are sometimes denied access to shelter or the protections and services of the McKinney-Vento Act (U.S. Department of Education).

METHODOLOGY

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 so-called "chronically homeless" -- particularly those who suffer from severe mental illness and/or addiction disorders and 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 homeless, including those living in doubled-up situations.

NATIONAL ESTIMATES OF HOMELESSNESS

There are several national estimates of homelessness. Many are dated, or based on dated information. For all of the reasons discussed above, none of these estimates is the definitive representation of "how many people are homeless." The best approximation is from a study done by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty which states that approximately 3.5 million people, 1.35 million of them children, are likely to experience homelessness in a given year (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2004).

These numbers, based on findings from the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, Urban Institute and specifically the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers, draw their estimates from a study of service providers across the country at two different times of the year in 1996. They found that, on a given night in October, 444,000 people (in 346,000 households) experienced homelessness – which translates to 6.3% of the population of people living in poverty. On a given night in February, 842,000 (in 637,000 households) experienced homelessness – which translates to almost 10% of the population of people living in poverty. Converting these estimates into an annual projection, the numbers that emerge are 2.3 million people (based on the October estimate) and 3.5 million people (based on the February estimate).

This translates to approximately 1% of the U.S. population experiencing homelessness each year, 38% (October) to 39% (February) of them being children (Urban Institute 2000).

It is also important to note that this study was based on a national survey of service providers. Since not all people experiencing homelessness utilize service providers, the actual numbers of people experiencing homelessness are likely higher than those found in the study. Thus, we are estimating on the high end of the study's numbers: 3.5 million people, 39% of which are children (Urban Institute 2000).

IS HOMELESSNESS INCREASING?

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 9 communities and 3 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.

CONCLUSION

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.

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