

# **HOMELESSNESS:**

## **Programs and the People They Serve**

### **Findings of the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients**

## **HIGHLIGHTS**

**Prepared for:  
Interagency Council on the Homeless**

**Andrew Cuomo, Chairperson  
Secretary of Housing and Urban Development**

**Donna E. Shalala, Vice Chairperson  
Secretary of Health and Human Services**

**Togo D. West, Jr., Vice Chairperson  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs**

**Prepared by:  
The Urban Institute  
Martha R. Burt  
Laudan Y. Aron  
Toby Douglas  
Jesse Valente  
Edgar Lee  
Britta Iwen**

**December 1999**

The contents of this report are the views of the contractor and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Housing and Urban Development or the U.S. Government.

# Preface

The 1996 National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients is a landmark study. It was designed to provide updated information about the providers of homeless assistance and the characteristics of homeless persons who use services. The survey is based on a statistical sample of 76 metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas, including small cities and rural areas. Data for the survey were collected between October 1995 and November 1996.

The survey is a response to the fact that homelessness remains one of America's most complicated and important social issues. Chronic poverty, coupled with physical and other disabilities, have combined with rapid changes in society, the workplace, and local housing markets to make many people vulnerable to its effects. With the enactment of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, Congress recognized the need to supplement "mainstream" federally funded housing and human services programs with funding that was specifically targeted to assist homeless people. Over \$11 billion in McKinney funds have been appropriated since then, and billions more have been provided through other federal, state, and local programs and benefits.

Those who provide assistance—the government agencies, the thousands of nonprofit organizations, and countless private individuals—have learned a great deal about effective ways to meet the needs of homeless people through improved supportive services, increased housing options and cooperative ventures among agencies providing assistance. Although substantial progress has been made in obtaining funding and learning about effective approaches, much more remains to be done.

Despite significant increases in funding, program administrators had to manage their programs without reliable national data on the characteristics of the people they were serving and the newly emerging networks of services and service providers. Indeed, the last national study was conducted by the Urban Institute in 1987. In 1991, federal agencies began initial planning for a new national survey to fill this gap.

The new survey was designed and funded by 12 federal agencies<sup>1</sup> in a collaborative venture under the auspices of the Interagency Council on the Homeless, a working group of the White House Domestic Policy Council. The U.S. Bureau of the Census collected the data, and the Urban Institute analyzed it. A panel comprised of public interest groups, nationally recognized researchers, and other experts on issues related to homelessness reviewed and commented on the analysis plan and draft reports. All of the draft survey instruments were published in the Federal Register for public review and comment.

It is important to note that the survey was *not* designed to produce a national count of the number of homeless people, nor does it include information on client characteristics at the regional or local levels. The survey *was* designed to provide up-to-date information about the providers of assistance to homeless people, the characteristics of those who use services that focus on homeless people, and how this population has changed in metropolitan areas since 1987. The analyses of the provider data examine factors such as geographic level (e.g., national, central city, communities outside of central cities but still within metropolitan statistical areas, and rural areas), program type, and the types and levels of services delivered. The data received from service users includes, but is not limited to, such characteristics as age, race/ethnicity, sex, family status, history of homelessness, employment, education, veteran status, and use of services and benefits.

The information in this report is critical to discussions about effective public policy responses needed to break the cycle of homelessness. As such, it provides an important baseline and foundation for future assessments of the nature and extent of homelessness. It also provides a

---

<sup>1</sup> The 12 federal agency sponsors include the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Veterans Affairs, Agriculture, Commerce, Education, Energy, Justice, Labor, and Transportation as well as the Social Security Administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

valuable overview that will improve our understanding of the characteristics of homeless people who use services, the nature of homelessness, and how best to address it<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> Two other items related to the survey are currently available. Lists containing the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of the homeless assistance providers in each of the 76 survey areas are available from the Inter-agency Council on the Homeless, HUD, 451 7th Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20410, Room 7274, or by emailing [survey-results@hud.gov](mailto:survey-results@hud.gov). Public use data files on CD may be purchased from Census Bureau Customer Service; call (301) 457-4100. Files are also available for downloading; go to [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) and then click on "N" under the alphabetical listing "A-Z."

# Highlights

*These highlights present information from Homelessness: Programs and the People They Serve- Summary Report in the form of frequently asked questions and answers. Also noted are some important questions that this study does not address.*

## Study Purpose and Design

*What is the purpose of the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC)?*

- NSHAPC was conducted in 1996 to provide information on homeless assistance programs and the clients who use them to federal agencies responsible for administering homeless assistance programs and to other interested parties. The data are national in scope, and the survey is the first to gather, through one effort, a wide range of information relevant to the missions of the federal sponsors.
- NSHAPC was *not* designed or conducted to produce a count or estimate of homeless persons.

*How was NSHAPC conducted?*

- The Bureau of the Census conducted the study for 12 federal agencies.
- NSHAPC selected a sample of 76 geographical areas to represent the entire United States, including
  - the 28 largest metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs);
  - 24 small and medium-sized MSAs randomly selected from the remaining MSAs; and
  - 24 groups of rural counties randomly selected from all rural counties.
- Through telephone interviews and a mail survey, the study identified and gathered information about 16 types of homeless assistance programs
  - emergency shelters
  - transitional housing programs
  - permanent housing programs for formerly homeless people
  - programs distributing vouchers for emergency accommodation
  - programs accepting vouchers in exchange for giving emergency accommodation
  - food pantries
  - soup kitchens
  - mobile food programs
  - physical health care programs
  - mental health care programs
  - alcohol/drug programs
  - HIV/AIDS programs
  - outreach programs
  - drop-in centers
  - migrant labor camps used to provide emergency shelter for homeless people
  - other programs
- A client survey was conducted. For this survey, homeless assistance programs<sup>3</sup> were randomly selected to represent all such programs in each of the study's primary sampling

---

<sup>3</sup> Programs included emergency shelters, transitional and permanent housing programs, voucher distribution programs, food pantries, soup kitchens, mobile food programs, outreach programs, drop-in centers, and other programs. Program types not expected to improve the coverage of homeless people significantly were not included in the client phase.

areas. Then users of these programs (clients) were randomly selected and interviewed to learn about their characteristics, situation, and needs.

*Who and what does the NSHAPC sample represent? How should the results be interpreted?*

- The findings represent
  - homeless assistance programs nationwide in 1996; and
  - homeless people and other users of these programs in 1996.
- Representatives of 11,909 programs were actually interviewed. These programs in the NSHAPC sample represent an estimated 40,000 such programs nationwide.
- 4,207 clients who use these programs were actually interviewed. They represent all of the clients who use such programs nationwide. Of these,
  - 54 percent were homeless at the time of their interview;
  - 22 percent had been homeless in the past but were not homeless at the time of the interview; and
  - the remaining 24 percent were other service users who had never been homeless.
- All information based on NSHAPC data are estimates. In general, percentages reported have a margin of error no greater than 4 percentage points.

## **Homeless Families**

*What proportion of homeless clients are in family households?*

- Each homeless *client* is an adult representing a *homeless household*.
- 15 percent of these are *family* households (that is, the clients have one or more of their own children under age 18 with them).
- On average, each homeless family household includes 2.2 minor children of the client.

*If we include the children as part of the total, what proportion of all homeless service users are members of homeless families?*

- 34 percent of homeless service users are members of homeless families.
- 23 percent are minor children and 11 percent are their parents.

*What are the basic characteristics of the parent clients in homeless families?*

- 84 percent are female and 16 percent are male.
- 38 percent are white non-Hispanic, 43 percent are black non-Hispanic, 15 percent are Hispanic, 3 percent are Native American, and 1 percent are other races-
- 26 percent are ages 17 to 24, 74 percent are ages 25 to 54, and less than 0.5 percent are ages 55 and older.
- 41 percent have never married, 23 percent are married, 23 percent are separated, 13 percent are divorced, and none are widowed.
- 53 percent have less than a high school education, 21 percent have completed high school, and 27 percent have some education beyond high school.

## **Single Homeless Clients**

*What are the basic characteristics of single homeless clients?*

- Most homeless clients (85 percent) are single (that is, they do not have any of their children with them).
- 77 percent are male and 23 percent are female.
- 41 percent are white non-Hispanic, 40 percent are black non-Hispanic, 10 percent are Hispanic, 8 percent are Native American, and 1 percent are other races-

- 10 percent are ages 17 to 24, 81 percent are ages 25 to 54, and 9 percent are ages 55 and older.
- 50 percent have never married, 7 percent are married, 14 percent are separated, 26 percent are divorced, and percent are widowed.
- 37 percent have less than a high school education, 36 percent have completed high school, and 28 percent have some education beyond high school.

## **Problems**

*Do homeless clients get enough to eat?*

- 28 percent say they sometimes or often do not get enough to eat, compared with 12 percent of poor American adults.
- 20 percent eat one meal a day or less.
- 39 percent say that in the last 30 days they were hungry but could not afford food to eat, compared with 5 percent of poor Americans-
- 40 percent went one or more days in the last 30 days without anything to eat because they could not afford food, compared with 3 percent of poor Americans.

*What proportion have problems with alcohol, drugs, or mental health?*

Within the past month:

- 38 percent report indicators of alcohol use problems.
- 26 percent report indicators of drug use problems.
- 39 percent report indicators of mental health problems.
- 66 percent report indicators of one or more of these problems.

*What proportion have physical health problems? What types of problems do they have?*

At the time of the interview:

- 3 percent report having HIV/AIDS.
- 3 percent report having tuberculosis.
- 26 percent report having acute infectious conditions, such as a cough, cold, bronchitis, pneumonia, tuberculosis, or sexually transmitted diseases other than AIDS.
- 8 percent report having acute noninfectious conditions, such as skin ulcers, lice, or scabies.
- 46 percent report having chronic health conditions, such as arthritis, high blood pressure, diabetes, or cancer.
- 55 percent have no medical insurance.

*What proportion experience victimization or violence while homeless?*

While they have been homeless:

- 38 percent say someone stole money or things directly from them.
- 41 percent say someone stole money or things from their possessions while they were not present
- 22 percent have been physically assaulted.
- 7 percent have been sexually assaulted.

*How poor are homeless clients?*

- Single homeless clients report a mean income of \$348 during the last 30 days. This amount is only 51 percent of the 1996 federal poverty level of \$680/ month for one person.
- Clients in family households report a mean income of \$475 during the last 30 days. This amount is only 46 percent of the 1996 federal poverty level of \$1,023/month for a family of three.
- Single homeless clients received only 12 percent of the median monthly income of all American households in 1995 (\$2,840) in the month before being interviewed, and homeless families received only 17 percent.

## **Sources of Income and Benefits**

*How many homeless clients did any paid work in the past month?*

- 44 percent did paid work during the past month. Of these:
  - 20 percent worked in a job lasting or expected to last at least three months.
  - 25 percent worked at a temporary or day labor job.
  - 2 percent earned money by peddling or selling personal belongings-
  - 3 percent report more than one source of earned income.

*How many receive income from family or friends?*

- 21 percent receive income from family members or friends, including:
  - 9 percent from parents.
  - 2 percent from a spouse.
  - 5 percent from other relatives.
  - 12 percent from friends, including boyfriends and girlfriends-
  - 1 percent from child support.
- 8 percent report income from more than one type of family member or friend.

*How many homeless clients receive government benefits? What types of benefits?*

- 37 percent receive food stamps.
- 52 percent of homeless households with children receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). (In 1996, when the survey was conducted, AFDC was still operating.)
- 11 percent receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI).
- 9 percent receive General Assistance or another state or local cash assistance benefit-
- 6 percent of homeless veterans receive veteran-related disability payments; 2 percent receive veteran-related pensions.
- 30 percent receive Medicaid, and another 7 percent receive medical care from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

*How many homeless clients receive money from panhandling?*

- 8 percent report income from panhandling in the last 30 days.

## **The Location of Homeless Clients**

*In what types of communities (big cities, suburbs, and rural areas) are homeless clients found?*

- There are homeless clients in every type of community. The majority of homeless clients, 71 percent, are in central cities, while 21 percent are in the suburbs and urban fringe areas, and 9 percent are in rural areas. These figures contrast with the distribution of 31, 46, and 23 percent, respectively, for poor people in the United States.

*How much do homeless clients move from one community to another?*

- 29 percent of homeless families and 46 percent of single homeless clients are not living in the same city or town where they became homeless.
- Major reasons given for leaving the city or town where they first became homeless are the lack of jobs, the lack of affordable housing, and being evicted from or asked to leave the place where they were living.
- Major reasons for coming to the city or town where they were interviewed are the presence of relatives or friends, the possibility of work, and the availability of shelters, missions, and other services.

*Within their communities, where can homeless clients be found? What services do they use?*

- 31 percent slept on the streets or in other places not meant for habitation within the last week.
- 66 percent used an emergency shelter, transitional housing program, or program offering vouchers for emergency accommodation within the last week.
- 36 percent used soup kitchens within the last week.
- 10 percent used other homeless assistance programs (e.g., drop-in centers, food pantries, outreach programs, mobile food programs) within the last week.

## **Patterns of Homelessness**

*How many people are homeless for the first time? How long are people homeless?*

- 49 percent of homeless clients are in their first episode of homelessness, while 34 percent have been homeless three or more times. Clients in families and single homeless clients are equally likely to be in their first homeless episode, but single clients are more likely than clients in families to have been homeless three times or more (37 versus 23 percent).
- For 28 percent of homeless clients, their current episode has lasted three months or less, but for 30 percent it has lasted more than two years. Clients in families are more than twice as likely as single clients to have been homeless for three months or less (49 versus 23 percent), while single clients are almost three times as likely as clients in families to be in homeless spells that have lasted more than two years (34 versus 13 percent).

## **Other Important Profiles**

*How many homeless clients are parents? Are their children with them?*

- 60 percent of homeless women have children ages 0 to 17; 65 percent of these women live with at least one of their minor children.
- 41 percent of homeless men have children ages 0 to 17; 7 percent of these men live with at least one of their minor children.

*What are the characteristics of the children of homeless clients?*

- 53 percent of the children accompanying a homeless parent in this study are male and 47 percent are female.

- Most of these children are young: 20 percent are ages 0 to 2, 22 percent are ages 3 to 5, 20 percent are ages 6 to 8, 33 percent are between the ages of 9 and 17, and age was not given for 5 percent.
- Parents report that 45 percent of the 3- to 5-year-olds attend preschool, and that 93 percent of school-age children (ages 6 to 17) attend school regularly.
- 51 percent of children are in households receiving AFDC, 70 percent are in households receiving food stamps, 12 percent are in households receiving SSI, and 73 percent receive Medicaid.

*How many homeless clients are veterans? What is the proportion for homeless men?*

- 23 percent of homeless clients are veterans, compared with about 13 percent of all American adults in 1996.
- 98 percent of homeless clients who are veterans are men. 33 percent of male homeless clients are veterans, as were 31 percent of American men in 1996.
- 21 percent served before the Vietnam era (before August 1964); 47 percent served during the Vietnam era (between August 1964 and April 1975); and 57 percent served since the Vietnam era (after April 1975). Many have served in more than one time period.
- 33 percent of the male veterans in the study were stationed in a war zone, and 28 percent were exposed to combat.

*What adverse childhood experiences did homeless clients report?*

- 27 percent of homeless clients lived in foster care, a group home, or other institutional setting for part of their childhood.
- 25 percent report childhood physical or sexual abuse.
- 21 percent report childhood experiences of homelessness.
- 33 percent report running away from home and 22 percent report being forced to leave home.

## **Homeless Assistance Programs**

*How many homeless assistance programs are there in the United States? What kinds of programs are they?*

- This study estimates that there are about 40,000 homeless assistance programs in the United States, offered at an estimated 21,000 service locations.
- Food pantries are the most numerous type of program, estimated to number 9,000 programs. Emergency shelters are next with an estimated 5,700 programs, followed closely by transitional housing programs (4,400), soup kitchens and other distributors of prepared meals (3,500), outreach programs (3,300), and voucher distribution programs (3,100).
- Emergency shelters expected 240,000 program contacts, transitional housing programs expected 160,000, permanent housing programs expected 110,000, and voucher distribution programs expected 70,000 program contacts on an average day in February 1996. Expected contacts include those made by both homeless and other people who use services.
- 49 percent of all homeless assistance *programs* are located in central cities, 32 percent in rural areas, and 19 percent in suburban areas. However, because central city programs serve more clients, a larger share of *program contacts* happen in central cities (57 percent) than in suburban and rural areas (20 and 23 percent of all *program contacts*, respectively).

- Great variation was found among the 76 sampling areas in their level of expected program contacts on an average day in February 1996.
  - The average estimated *rate of program contacts per 10,000 poor people* in a sampling area is 1,437, with a high of 9,000 and a low of 0. The biggest cities are providing about equal levels of service in relation to their poor population. Small and medium-sized metropolitan areas and rural areas reveal much more variability in service levels.

## **Changes between 1987 and 1996**

*What comparisons are possible between NSHAPC data and the last national study, conducted in 1987 by the Urban Institute (Burt and Cohen 1989)?*

- The 1987 study included only shelters and soup kitchens in large U.S. cities (those with 100,000 or more population), therefore the 1996 statistics used for this comparison use only homeless NSHAPC clients found in central cities who were sampled from emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, voucher distribution programs, and soup kitchens.

*How do homeless shelter and soup kitchen clients located in central cities in 1996 compare to those in 1987?*

- They are less likely to be white (39 versus 46 percent) and more likely to be black (46 versus 41 percent).
- They are better educated (more likely to have completed high school--39 versus 32 percent, and to have some education beyond high school--27 versus 20 percent).
- More have never married (51 versus 45 percent), but have the same likelihood of living in family households (10 percent in each year).
- They are much more likely to get government benefits: AFDC among homeless families with children-- 58 percent in 1996 versus 33 percent in 1987; food stamps among all homeless--38 versus 18 percent; SSI among all homeless--13 versus 4 percent.
- They have higher average monthly incomes per capita after adjusting for inflation (\$267 in 1996 versus \$189 in 1987), but are still very poor.
- They are less likely to say they sometimes or often do not get enough to eat--28 percent versus 38 percent; and more likely to say they get enough of what they want to eat--31 percent versus 19 percent.
- No differences were found in the proportion experiencing inpatient treatment for alcohol or drug abuse, or for mental health problems.

## **Questions This Report Does *Not* Answer**

- How many homeless people are there? How many homeless people are there in my city/county/state?
- What are the characteristics of homeless people in my city/county/state?
- What factors cause homelessness?
- What programs work best?

## **What If You Want to Know More?**

*Homelessness: Programs and the People They Serve-Summary Report* contains more detailed information relevant to the questions posed in these highlights, as well as many other issues. Readers who want an even more detailed look at study results, or those who want to know more about its methodology, should consult *Homelessness: Programs and the People They Serve-*

*Technical Report.* Two other items related to the survey are currently available. Lists containing the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of the homeless assistance providers in each of the 76 survey areas are available from the Interagency Council on the Homeless, HUD, 451 7th Street, SW, Room 7274, Washington, D.C. 20410, or by emailing [survey\\_results@hud.gov](mailto:survey_results@hud.gov). Public use data files on CD may be purchased from Census Bureau Customer Service; call (301) 457-4100. Files are also available for downloading: go to [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) and then click on " N" under the alphabetical listings "A-Z."

***For Further Reading See:***

- *Summary Report -Homelessness: Programs and the People They Serve:* The principal report of the survey, which includes the *Highlights* (above), five chapters summarizing the methodology and data in greater detail, and numerous figures and tables. 100 pages.
- *Technical Report-Homelessness: Programs and the People They Serve:* The full detailed technical report consisting of 17 chapters with appendices. Approximately 575 pages.

The preceding reports are available on the Internet at [www.huduser.org](http://www.huduser.org) and from HUD USER at 1-800-245-2691 (P.O. Box 6091, Rockville, MD 20849). Contact HUD USER for information on pricing and availability. There is no charge for single copies of the *Highlights* and the *Summary Report*.

- *Lists of Homeless Assistance Providers Who Participated in the Survey:* Lists of the agencies and organizations in each of the 76 survey sample areas which reported to Census Bureau staff that they met the definition of a homeless assistance provider based on program activities they conducted as of February 1996. (NOTE: Some of the information on these lists may no longer be current because of numerous changes in local service provider networks since 1996.) Available from HUD USER.

***Additional resources for researchers:***

Available from the U.S. Bureau of the Census:

- **Public Use Data Files:** Three data files containing all of the survey data with the exception of certain items that have been omitted to assure respondent privacy. The data files are accompanied by data dictionaries, information on data weighting, and other guidance necessary for researchers to replicate the NSHAPC analyses and conduct additional analyses. Public use data files on CD can be purchased from Census Bureau Customer Service at (301) 457-4100. Some files are also available on the Internet for downloading. For further information, go to [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) and click on "N" under the alphabetical listings "A-Z."