

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC) was conducted to provide updated information about the providers of homeless assistance services and the characteristics of homeless clients who use these services for use by federal agencies responsible for administering homeless assistance programs and 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 the number of homeless persons.

Homelessness has been a constant presence in American cities, towns, and rural areas for many years, although during the recession of 1981-82 it was identified as a national issue for the first time since the Great Depression. Since the early 1980s homelessness has been a regular focus of media interest and a topic of policy debate. The array of programs and services for homeless persons has increased greatly during this period, as has the funding needed to support them.

Reliable and comprehensive information about homeless people has not been easy to obtain at the national level. In 1987 the Urban Institute conducted the first national study to interview homeless people at some depth on a variety of topics. The data from that study were collected before the passage of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, and before the significant increase in federal involvement and program development that followed. Further, although national in scope, the Urban Institute study included only central cities and collected data only from emergency shelter and soup kitchen users, so it could not be used to characterize homelessness in the entire United States. NSHAPC is the second probability-based interview study to be national in scope. This time, homeless people in smaller cities, suburbs, and rural areas are included to obtain a full picture of homeless service users in late 1996. NSHAPC thus provides the first opportunity since 1987 to update the national picture of homelessness in a comprehensive and reliable way.

NSHAPC was conceived, developed, and funded by 12 federal agencies under the auspices of the Interagency Council on the Homeless, a working group of the White House Domestic Policy Council.¹ The Census Bureau carried out the data collection on behalf of the sponsoring agencies.

¹ The 12 federal sponsoring agencies are the U.S. Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Veterans Affairs, Agriculture, Commerce, Education, Energy, Justice, Labor, and Transportation, and the Social Security Administration, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

STUDY OVERVIEW²

The NSHAPC study was designed to collect data from a nationally representative sample of homeless assistance programs and the people who use them (exhibit 1.1). Its 76 primary sampling areas include (figure 1.1)

- the 28 largest metropolitan statistical areas in the United States;
- 24 small and medium-sized metropolitan statistical areas, selected at random to be representative of geographical regions (northeast, south, midwest, west) and size; and
- 24 rural areas (groups of counties or, in New England, groups of smaller administrative units—MCDs—within counties), selected at random from a sampling frame defined as the catchment areas of Community Action agencies, and representative of geographical regions.

The study began within each of the 76 primary sampling areas by identifying and collecting information about *all* of the programs that met its definition of a homeless assistance program. Such programs had to *have a focus* on serving homeless clients (although they did not have to serve homeless clients exclusively). They also had to offer direct service, and be within the geographical boundaries of the sampling area. In rural areas the study’s definition of a program was expanded to include programs that *served* homeless clients but may not have had this population as a *focus*. Sixteen types of homeless assistance programs were defined (exhibit 1.1).

The study collected information in three ways:

- *Homeless assistance programs—basic description*
 - **Telephone interviews with representatives of 6,307 service locations offering 11,983 homeless assistance programs**
 - » A *service location* is the physical location at which one or more programs operate. A *homeless assistance program* is a set of services offered to the same group of people at a single location and focused on serving homeless clients as an intended population (although not always the only population).
 - » Program directors or other staff knowledgeable about the program(s) offered at a particular location were interviewed by telephone. Basic descriptions of all homeless assistance programs offered at that location were obtained.

² Readers interested in more detail about the methods used in NSHAPC should read Chapter 2 and Appendix A for a list of the 76 primary sampling areas, Appendix B for definitions of the 16 program types included in the study, Appendix C for a detailed description of the study’s methodology, Appendix D for weighting procedures, and Appendix E for the survey instruments.

Exhibit 1.1 Overview of NSHAPC Study Design

National Sample Based on:

- 28 largest metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs)
- 24 MSAs randomly sampled from the remaining small and medium-sized MSAs
- 24 randomly sampled groups of rural counties or parts of counties

Definitions

- *Service Location*: a physical location at which one or more homeless assistance programs operate

- *Program*: any one of the 16 types of programs eligible for inclusion in NSHAPC:
 - § Emergency shelters
 - § Transitional housing
 - § Permanent housing for the homeless
 - § Programs offering vouchers for temporary housing
 - § Programs accepting vouchers for temporary housing
 - § Food pantries
 - § Soup kitchens/meal distribution programs
 - § Mobile food programs
 - § Physical health care programs
 - § Mental health care programs
 - § Alcohol/drug abuse programs
 - § HIV/AIDS programs
 - § Outreach programs
 - § Drop-in centers
 - § Migrant housing used for homeless people
 - § Other

- *Service*: goods or activities offered to program clients

- *Client*: anyone who uses a program and is not accompanied by a parent

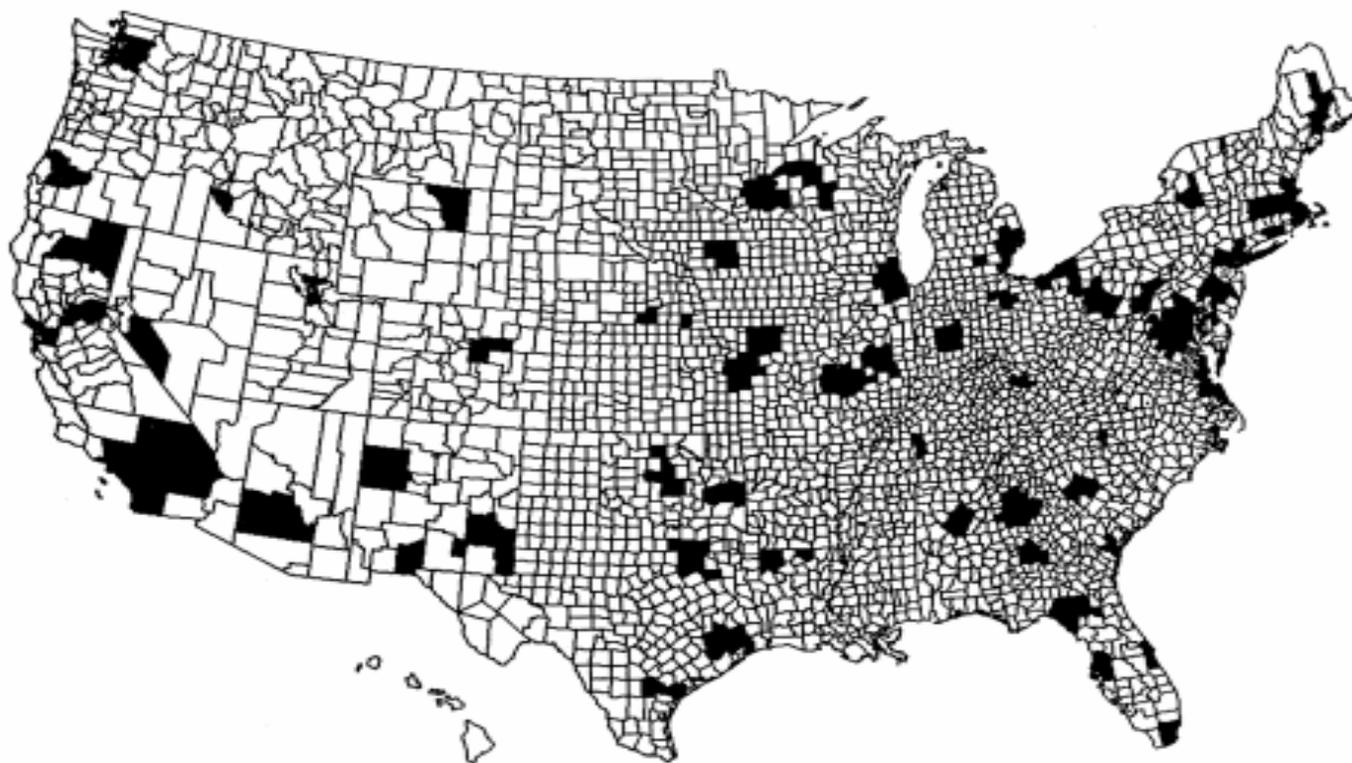
Data Collection Techniques

- *Telephone interviews* with representatives of all service locations identified in the sampled geographic areas (final unweighted sample of 6,307 service locations and the 11,983 programs they report offering)

- *Mail survey* of programs identified through the telephone interviews (final unweighted sample of 5,694 programs)

- *Client interviews* in a sample of programs in each of the sampled geographic areas (final unweighted sample of 4,207 clients)

Figure 1.1
NSHAPC's 76 Primary Sampling Areas



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE DSMD Bureau of the Census

- *Homeless assistance programs—detailed information about services*
 - **Mail surveys from 5,694 programs**
 - » Surveys were completed by a staff person who knew the program and its clients well. Detailed information was collected about client needs, the extent to which these needs were met, and whether services to meet these needs were available at their own program or other programs in the community.
 - » A *service* is any good or activity offered to people using a *program*, but not qualifying on its own as a *program*.

- *Clients of homeless assistance programs*
 - **Interviews with 4,207 clients**
 - » A *client* is someone who uses a *program*, whether he or she is homeless or not. Interviews were conducted with clients of any age as long as they were *not* accompanied by a parent or guardian.
 - » In each sampling area, the study selected a sample of the programs identified through the telephone interviews, taking into consideration program type and program size. Six to eight clients were interviewed at each of approximately 700 program visits. Census Bureau staff worked with the programs selected to establish the best times and methods to select and interview clients, and methods to pay clients once interviews were completed.
 - » Clients, including homeless people and others who use the programs, were selected randomly from among all clients using the program at the time of data collection. They were interviewed in person by trained interviewers from the Census Bureau. Most interviews took place at the program location. Clients selected through outreach programs or programs operating in the evening or at night were sometimes interviewed the next day at locations arranged in advance. Every effort was made to assure privacy during the interview. Clients completing the interview received \$10 for their time.

LIMITATIONS OF NSHAPC FINDINGS

There are some important aspects of the NSHAPC study that readers need to know if the study's findings are to be interpreted correctly. Chapter 2 presents methodological issues in some detail, but a brief description of the most critical interpretive issues is offered here.

The Study Is Descriptive

This study is intended to provide information describing currently homeless and other people using homeless assistance programs in the United States. There is no intent to infer causes of homelessness from this descriptive information. Statistics are presented as simply as possible, for ease of understanding. Where information is available, the report compares study findings for homeless clients to statistics describing all American adults, all poor adults, or other relevant national populations. This is intended to help the reader understand similarities and differences between poor people or the population in general and clients participating in NSHAPC in the fall of 1996. When a statistic looks simple but actually reflects some hidden third factor, the report tries to point this out. For example, the report shows that veterans comprise a higher proportion of street stayers than they do of shelter stayers. But the report also points out that this is because more street stayers are men and almost all of the veterans in the sample are men, not because veterans have a special propensity for sleeping on the streets.

The People in the Study Come from Homeless Assistance Programs

The people interviewed for NSHAPC are clients of homeless assistance programs, including shelter/housing, food, and other programs. In cities and other communities with many programs, this approach is an efficient and effective way to find and interview a very high proportion of homeless people. However, in communities without many services this approach will miss many homeless people, and the complete absence of services in a community, and therefore of people interviewed for this study (as happened in two rural sampling areas) cannot be taken to mean that such communities do not have any homeless people.

In addition, there may be some systematic biases in the people who are interviewed and those who are missed when a community does not have a full range of homeless assistance services. If soup kitchens are rare in rural areas, typical soup kitchen users will be less likely to appear in rural homeless samples. If suburbs will accept transitional housing programs for families but not for recovering substance users or people with mental health problems, then a service-based methodology will make suburban homeless populations look as if they have higher proportions of families and lower proportions of people with mental health or substance use problems.

A service-based approach to data collection is the most reasonable way that a *national* study of homelessness could be undertaken and still be statistically meaningful (see the paper by Tourkin and Hubble, Appendix C of the *Technical Report*, for an explanation of why this study used a service-based design). Local studies can compensate for gaps in a community's service system, but there is no realistic way for a national study to do so. The reader is therefore advised to use caution in interpreting differences in homelessness between communities of different types, as some of the differences will probably reflect service system variations rather than true differences in homeless populations.

NSHAPC Was Designed to Collect Data on Clients Who Use Homeless Assistance Services

Many homeless assistance programs serve people who are not currently homeless. As a result of the study's random sampling of all program clients, some clients in the NSHAPC sample were not homeless at the time they were interviewed. This is particularly true for programs other than shelter and housing programs. Information collected during the interview indicated that some have been homeless at least once in their lifetime; this report refers to this group as "formerly homeless clients." The remaining clients, who reporting never having been homeless, are referred to as "other service users."

The study designers wanted to know the characteristics of people using the programs, including information about their living situation. The reader should remember that while the study design produces as close to a nationally representative sample of homeless people as possible, the same is not true for formerly homeless clients and other service users. As unrepresentative of their larger categories as these two subgroups of the sample may be, information about them is important for service providers. These two groups make up almost half of all people who use homeless assistance programs, so information about their characteristics can be of considerable help to program managers.

All Client Information Comes from the Clients Themselves

The study interviewed clients of homeless assistance programs about their experiences, and recorded their responses. No attempt was made to verify or confirm the accuracy of what clients said about themselves. This is especially important for readers to remember when they review information about the clients' health conditions, use of alcohol and drugs, mental health problems, incarceration, victimization, joblessness, and other subjects. Clients may not actually know some things, such as medical conditions (e.g., hypertension, anemia), if they do not see doctors regularly. They may have forgotten, or wish to downplay, other things that carry some level of social stigma. Furthermore, many questions were asked and left up to the client to interpret, including such critical issues as whether or not they had ever been homeless (no "official" definition was given or imposed on clients).

WHAT THE STUDY DOES NOT DO

All studies have limitations, and NSHAPC is no different. This report does not include information on the following issues, because the study was not designed to address them:

- How many homeless people are there? Neither the program nor the client component of NSHAPC provides or was intended to provide a count or census of homeless persons in the United States. Such a count would be logistically impossible as well as prohibitively costly, as the experience of the Street and Shelter Night component of the 1990 Decennial Census clearly showed. Further, NSHAPC misses all homeless people who never contact a homeless assistance program, either out of personal preference or because no programs are available to

them. Homeless assistance program estimates of the people they expect to serve will be inaccurate because they include many people who are not homeless, as well as an unknowable amount of duplicate counting (because people often use more than one program).

- How many homeless people are there in my city/county/state? (The study was not designed to answer this question).
- What are the characteristics of homeless people in my city/county/state? (The study can reliably describe homeless people in central cities as a group, suburbs and urban fringe areas as a group, and rural areas as a group. However, it cannot describe population characteristics for smaller geographic areas).
- What programs work best? (NSHAPC is not a program evaluation, and does not contain any outcome or impact information);
- Are there “enough” services? (This question can only be answered at the local level, using information about the amount of each service that is available and the number of people who need it).

It is also important for the reader to remember that this study obtained information about homeless clients and other service users during October-November 1996. As with all information that focuses on homelessness at a single point in time, it will overemphasize people with long episodes of homelessness and underemphasize people with short periods of homelessness and also people who are homeless for the first time. Any characteristics associated with length of a homeless episode will likewise be skewed toward the characteristics of people with longer spells of homelessness.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS TECHNICAL REPORT

The remainder of this report presents information about people who use NSHAPC programs, referred to throughout as clients or respondents, and programs and service locations. Chapter 2 describes the methods the study used to collect data, and also gives definitions for critical concepts used throughout the analysis. These include: the criteria used for identifying which clients are currently homeless and which are formerly homeless; what is considered a “family”; how problems with alcohol use, drug use, and mental health issues were identified; the meaning of geographical terms such as central city, suburban/urban fringe, and rural; and the time frames used in the report.

Chapters 3 through 13 present information about clients of homeless assistance programs. Chapter 3 presents information on clients’ demographic characteristics. Chapter 4 examines history of homelessness among currently and formerly homeless clients. Chapter 5 looks at income, income sources, employment and unemployment, and participation in government programs. Chapter 6 looks at physical health conditions and access to medical and dental treatment. Chapter 7 presents information on the food situation of clients, including food

problems and food access. Chapter 8 examines special needs, including past month, past year, and lifetime alcohol, drug, and mental health problems, treatment experiences related to these problems, incarceration history, and victimization while homeless. Chapter 9 looks at service needs from the client's perspective. Chapter 10 presents information about adverse childhood experiences including out-of-home placement, victimization, runaway and homeless experiences, and early involvement with drugs and alcohol. Chapter 11 presents a comparison of characteristics for male veterans and non-veterans in the sample. Chapter 12 looks at the characteristics and situation of children in homeless families, including their educational situation, presence of food problems, and access to medical and dental care. Chapter 13 offers an overview of similarities and differences of clients sampled in central city, suburban, and rural locations.

Chapters 14 through 17 examine characteristics of homeless assistance programs. Chapter 14 presents basic program characteristics including type, size, the type of agency that operates the program, and funding sources. Chapter 15 examines special population focuses that the programs may have. Chapter 16 looks at program staff perceptions of client service needs, the likelihood that these needs are met, and the source of services to meet the need. Chapter 17 presents information about service levels in the 76 primary sampling areas included in the study, and compares per capita level of services among the areas.

OTHER NSHAPC PRODUCTS

Two other products related to this report are currently available. Lists containing the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of the homeless assistance providers in each of the 76 sampling areas who reported in 1996 that they met the criteria for inclusion are available from the Interagency Council on the Homeless, HUD, 451 7th Street S.W., Room 7274, Washington, DC 20410, or by email at survey_results@hud.gov. Public use data files containing the service location, program, and client data and all necessary documentation are available from the Bureau of the Census. A CD containing the files may be purchased from the Census Bureau Customer Service, 301-457-4100. Or, files may be downloaded from www.census.gov, click on "Subjects A to Z," then on "N" and search for NSHAPC.