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Methodologies for Examining Homelessness and Their Application to a Mandated Statewide Study

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Using findings from a federally mandated statewide study of homelessness in the state of Iowa, this paper presents methodologies developed to address various aspects of homeless research, including enumeration of the population, screening for reporting duplications, estimating the annual number of incidents of homelessness, and exploring county-level estimates of homelessness. After implementing an algorithm to eliminate duplicate reporting, and using the baseline unduplicated reported number of homeless persons, a statewide estimate of the number of homeless individuals was derived. Following further adjustments for differences in agency reporting practices and after extrapolating for nonreported time periods, we estimated the number of unique incidents of homelessness experienced in the state during the year of the study (1997). The policy implications of these findings are discussed.

Homelessness is the most graphic representation and startling illustration of the nation's poverty, for to be without a place to live and without resources to obtain shelter is to be truly poor. Yet even after several years of research designed to describe most aspects of the problem, the face of homelessness remains blurry and ill-defined. Because both the causes and consequences of homelessness appear to be as varied as the individuals themselves, most researchers who study the problem agree that it endures despite widespread programmatic efforts to reduce the problem significantly.

Researchers who attempt to carry through with well-designed studies aimed at shedding further light on the homeless problem face serious methodological challenges, beginning with the difficult task of enumerating the homeless population accurately. Concerns have included (but are not limited to) issues of the operational definition of homelessness, determining an appropriate sampling frame, the accuracy of the numbers resulting from any counting effort, and debate over the best counting methodology (e.g., point-in-time or annual). And, in addition to being a very difficult personal circumstance, homelessness is also a very fluid social problem (i.e., most homeless individuals move into and out of homelessness more or less at random, as part of a lifestyle of chronic poverty and/or family abuse.) Consequently, these difficult methodological issues are not easy to resolve when attempting to document the numbers of homeless persons with any degree of accuracy.

The methodologies described in this paper and the research findings resulting from their application in a mandated statewide study endeavor to advance the study of homelessness in the following ways:

First, by obtaining specific demographic information on each reported individual included in the statewide study, we were able to create a "unique identifier" for each individual. This provided a means to address the reporting

duplication problem (see Burt, 1994; Burt & Cohen, 1989) rigorously by permitting us to eliminate individuals who were reported more than once by different schools, shelters, or other agencies. Our procedure broadly follows that pursued by Culhane, Avery, and Hadley (1998) in their longitudinal study of the prevalence of treated behavioral disorders among adult shelter users based on Philadelphia administrative data. Culhane et al. (1998) merged behavioral health files with Office of Services to the Homeless Adults Client Registry System data using social security numbers (SS#s) and unique identifiers created from a combination of parts of first names, last names, dates of birth, and gender (Culhane et al., 1998, p. 65).

Second, we used the unduplicated reported number of homeless persons in combination with other information, such as a multiplication factor applied to known shelter bed capacity, to develop a county-level estimate of the number of incidents[1] of homelessness. An estimate of the number of incidents of homelessness is particularly useful in understanding the fluidity of homelessness, whereby many individuals move into and out of the circumstance of homelessness more than once. Culhane (1992b), for example, reported significant turnover in the sheltered homeless population of Philadelphia, to the extent of six persons per bed per year, and subsequently (Culhane, Dejowski, Ibanez, Needham, & Macchia, 1994) used turnover information in developing counts of sheltered homeless populations. It is important to note that in our study we are attempting to be as comprehensive as possible in estimating a statewide homeless population. This is a much more difficult task than generating comparable estimates for a single large city. Because records are less likely to be comparable across agencies, geographic and regional dispersions become major complications (including rural and suburban, as well as urban, areas), and survey data must be obtained from a highly varied array of agency types cutting across municipal, county, and state-level units of government. Additionally, schools maintain records in different formats, with inconsistent quality control, and report their data using different time intervals.

Third, using the unduplicated reported number of homeless persons, we estimated a statewide annual number of homeless persons, based upon the assumption that one-third of the reported number of homeless persons are chronically homeless (i.e., 12 incidents), one-third are homeless episodically (i.e., 6 incidents), and one-third were homeless only once (i.e., 1 incident) during the year of this study (1997). Support for the assumption of multiple patterns of homelessness is provided in the research literature (Hopper, 1995; Link et al., 1995; Piliavin, Wright, Mare, & Westerfelt, 1996; Rossi, 1991; Sosin, Piliavin, & Westerfelt, 1990; Wright & Devine, 1995). In an application of cluster analysis to public shelter data from New York City and Philadelphia, Kuhn and Culhane (1998) have provided strong empirical support for the threefold typology of transitional, episodic, and chronic forms of homelessness, and an event history analysis of longitudinal data from the same two large cities (Culhane & Kuhn, 1998) demonstrated the existence of distinct types of shelter utilization, by rates of shelter discharge and reentry, and argued for the same typology. It is important to note, however, that Kuhn and Culhane (1998) and Culhane and Kuhn (1998) excluded periods of street homelessness and the use of privately funded shelters, examined only homeless individuals, not families (which constitute approximately 60% of the sheltered population in both cities), and omitted one-night stays by single men. The generalizability of such findings to smaller cities and towns is unclear (Kuhn & Culhane, 1998, p. 229), largely because "shelter use is just one

facet of the broader experience of residential instability among poor people" (Culhane, 1992b, p. 438; see also Culhane, 1992a; Sosin et al., 1990).

Fourth, we analyzed the data regionally, using the population definitions of rural, small metropolitan, and large metropolitan counties developed by Bruner (1993). This approach assisted us in estimating incidents of homelessness in rural counties where no homeless actually were reported.

Overall, we endeavor to provide substance to previously published work on homelessness. Earlier works on counting the number of homeless persons have explored this issue largely from a theoretical perspective, with some practical experience included. Instead, this article addresses the issues related to counting the homeless not as a set of abstracted ideas, with emphasis on debating the efficacy of that activity, but rather as a mandate for which concrete steps had to be taken to provide meaningful and replicable results suitable for practical policy evaluation.

Past studies of homelessness have given rise to a critical mass of initiatives that desperately need to be reexamined following at least a decade of rising public interest in homelessness and expert study of a societal problem that has received at best frugal support and regulation that sometimes has been inappropriate. Previous programmatic efforts to reduce homelessness have tended to be underfunded at the federal, state, and local levels, and in many places people are not even able to receive shelter, which is the first step toward receiving social services. These programmatic limitations in addressing solutions to the problem of homelessness, as well as the limited and incomplete nature of the extant research on measuring the scope of homelessness, provide the motivation for our research.

Review of the Background Literature

Difficulties with describing and enumerating the homeless population accurately have plagued efforts to describe homelessness effectively since this problem first came to the attention of social scientists almost 20 years ago. The current study was no exception. A brief discussion follows of the more pressing issues that arise in efforts to define the problem of homelessness and to enumerate its scope.

Defining Homelessness

Any systematic effort to count the homeless must begin by attempting to define the problem in precise, operational terms. However, a widely acceptable and uniformly interpreted definition of homelessness has yet to be agreed upon, among either researchers or homeless advocates. Generally, the most common definition of homelessness (and the one used in this study) is the one proposed in Section 103 of the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (1987), and codified as Title 42—The Public Health and Welfare, Chapter 119, Homeless Assistance, Subchapter I (General Provisions 11302—general definition of a homeless individual). This amendment states that, for purposes of this Act, the term "homeless" or "homeless individual" includes: (1) an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and (2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is: (a) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill); (b) an

institution that provides temporary residence for individuals intending to be institutionalized; or (c) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings. Excluded is any individual imprisoned or otherwise detained pursuant to an Act of Congress or a state law (PL 100-77; July 22, 1987). Agencies administering homeless assistance programs sometimes broaden this definition to include individuals residing in transitional or supportive housing.

In the time since the McKinney definition has come into favor for purposes of researching the homeless problem as well as for driving applications for homeless assistance and housing program funding, the term "doubled-up" has been included frequently as an additional definitional category of homelessness. "Doubled-up" refers to families or individuals who take up residence with friends or relatives, and usually is applied to rural rather than to urban homelessness. However, this definition of homelessness presents a research dilemma because most rural homelessness is so deeply embedded within rural poverty as to be virtually indistinguishable from it (Dail, 1997). Doubling-up is often a way of coping with the overriding problems of poverty and/or domestic violence in rural areas, and it is not uncommon to find individuals and families sharing housing for brief periods of time when it is necessary to do so. Rural families tend to accommodate one another in this way, and do not consider themselves to be homeless just because they are temporarily living with extended family, for whatever reason (Dail, 1997). However, from the "political" viewpoint, excluding the category of doubled-up is very problematic because it is the "bread and butter" of verifying the existence of rural homelessness.

These complex definitional debates have not stopped some of the more courageous social scientists from attempting to enumerate and describe homelessness, and various methodologies and interpretations of the resulting data have been attempted. The S-night national homeless census attempted in 1990 was criticized both for its methodology and for the numbers that resulted (for a full discussion, see Martin, 1992; Wright & Devine, 1992). This effort ignited fierce debate between homeless advocates, who believe the number of homeless is significantly underestimated by government officials, and government officials—as well as many social scientists, who argue that the advocates massively inflate their numbers, do not control for duplication in reporting and have no hard data to back up their claims about the severity of the problem. Until some agreed-upon definition of homelessness is achieved, it will never be possible to derive an accurate nationwide or even statewide count of the homeless. The results of any counting effort depend precisely upon the definition of homelessness that is employed, and every effort to enumerate the extent of homelessness first must be reviewed to determine the operational definition of homelessness employed for the study.

Determining Population Numbers

Deriving an accurate estimate of the frequency of occurrence of various categories of homelessness are legend, and remain a serious challenge to social science methodology and a puzzle for homeless researchers to solve within the context of the homeless study they wish to undertake. Thus, in addition to the complex political and philosophical issues surrounding efforts to enumerate the homeless population, concerns persist about the operational definition of homelessness, determining an adequate and appropriate sampling framework,

generating accurate numbers, and whether a point-in-time or annualized estimation research protocol results in more accurate findings. None of these issues is easy to resolve. Nevertheless, the fact remains that within any given time period, there are an unknown number of individuals who for various reasons are appropriately classified as homeless and who should be documented as such in some reliable way.

Because the social science literature remains inconclusive about the best methodology for counting and estimating the homeless population, the decision about how to address this challenge generally is left to individual researchers who know best the context and constraints of the individual geographic area in which a counting effort might be attempted (see Dail & Shelley, 1996 for an example). Among the more recent discussions of how to define and count the homeless is a book by Jencks (1995). Jencks narrows the definition of homelessness to include only the more visible homeless (i.e., those in shelters and on the streets), because he believes that these are the ones who concern society the most and are the targets of most social intervention programs. In addition, he also suggests that it is necessary to determine whether those living doubled-up are doing so voluntarily or involuntarily before automatically including them in a count of the homeless.

Cowan (1991) suggests that many methods to count/estimate the homeless reflect the local constraints of the geographic region in which the count is being attempted, the costs involved in implementing various methodologies appropriate to a given region, problems with defining homelessness, and the purposes for collecting the data. He also believes that most methods employed in counting the homeless do not allow for evaluation of the accuracy or thoroughness of the counts, rest heavily upon assumptions about the population that may or may not be valid, and rely upon a self-contained survey that uses only the actual data collected as the core of the counting effort. To address these issues, he proposes implementation of a capture-recapture (i.e., count-recount) methodology as a model, and sampling in space and time (SIST).

Count-recount is a beneficial approach because it assumes that, within two or more counting periods, every individual in the population has some chance of being included, and that from the frequencies and patterns of observations for individuals it then becomes possible to estimate the total number of affected persons. While perhaps a more realistic approach than count-recount, for SIST to be effective there must be a carefully stratified sample and adherence to the requisite counting rules (Cowan, 1991). Double-counting is not likely to occur if the time frame is short; however, estimating successfully from the resulting SIST-generated numbers is more complicated than comparable estimates of data gathered with a count-recount methodology.

Glasser (1994) concurs that cost of the count as well as defining the problem are the two most difficult issues in researching homelessness. In addition, he suggests that the most difficult to count, and perhaps the largest proportion, of the homeless population are families living doubled-up with other families, families that are divided due to lack of housing, and families living in abandoned buildings who would not want to be discovered because of the consequences to their children and the risk of losing them to foster care because of their failure to provide suitable living conditions. As a result, many estimates of homelessness that are based upon point-in-time methodologies will fail to include these categories of the homeless, and will not be likely to generate the kind of data upon which estimates of these two subpopulations reasonably can be derived.

While arguing that survey estimates of the number of homeless persons generally are considered to be more accurate and more scientific than are estimates provided by lay informants, Link et al. (1995) also observed that both surveys and point prevalence studies can result in undercounts because these methodologies do not uncover the hidden homeless. Using a randomly selected population, Link et al. (1995) conducted a national telephone survey of households, asking respondents if they had ever considered themselves to be homeless. Those responding in the affirmative were asked additional questions about their circumstances. This unconventional approach to estimating the prevalence of homelessness in the general population was criticized in the scientific community because it allowed participants to determine their own definition of homelessness. However, in a follow-up to the original study, and after altering the methodology to define homelessness more precisely, the authors (Link et al., 1995) replicated their initial results and concluded that approximately 14% of the total sample had been homeless at some point in their lives. This estimate is considerably higher than estimates emerging from any previous efforts to describe homelessness.

Rossi (1989) has suggested five approaches to researching homelessness: key person surveys, partial counts, heroic extrapolations from partial counts, windshield street surveys, and adaptations of various area probability designs. He uses the advantages and disadvantages of these methods to argue for a national survey of homelessness, using an agreed-upon definition, that would provide data useful in informing the development of social programs to address the homeless problem, establish good evaluation measures to assess the effectiveness of these programs, and thereby reduce the prevalence of homelessness. These same arguments are applicable to any statewide efforts to count the homeless, and many states already have adopted some means for an ongoing, statewide annualized count of the homeless.

The Current Research

Unlike other research on homelessness (Culhane, 1992a, 1992b; Culhane et al., 1998; Culhane & Kuhn, 1998; Kuhn & Culhane, 1998; Wong, Culhane, & Kuhn, 1997) that relied solely on big-city administrative data, in this effort to enumerate the statewide scope of homelessness in a predominately rural state with a sparsely distributed population, we have followed a procedure for data collection that is more sample-based, although the data were reported by agencies that serve the homeless. In concluding their use of a Cox proportional hazards model to identify the effects of demographic, family structure, reasons for homelessness, and time-related variables on the hazard rates for different types of shelter discharge and shelter reentry in New York City, using administrative records data, Wong et al. (1997) suggested that future research on homelessness should employ case study and survey methods. Similarly, Culhane and Kuhn (1998, p. 26) suggested that administrative records data were of less use "for understanding the dynamics of residential instability and homelessness more broadly, particularly street homelessness" than "for understanding the dynamics of shelter utilization and the administration of shelter programs." A major contribution of our research is precisely the attempt to capture the widest possible scope of the circumstances of homelessness, beyond shelter-based counts.

This study was executed in response to a mandate resulting from the 1987 McKinney legislation that directs all states to take a biannual census of all

homeless children. There is wide variance among states in determining how these counts are carried out, but most, including the one being reported here, are executed through state departments of education.

The operational definition of homelessness utilized for this study was the one proposed in the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (1987) and discussed above. The U.S. Department of Education (1989) provides additional guidelines for operationalizing the McKinney definition of homelessness by specifying which categories of homelessness should and should not be included in a census of homeless children specifically. These guidelines (cited in Wright & Wright, 1992) suggest that counts of homeless children *should* include children who are living in shelters for runaways, on the streets, in abandoned buildings, or in other facilities unfit for human habitation; children who do not have an adequate home base that serves as a permanent home; children living in camping areas (or trailer parks) because they lack adequate accommodations; children in transitional emergency shelters; sick or abandoned children living in state institutions because of no other suitable alternative; runaway/throwaway children living together as a group in a suitable shelter; and children living with friends or relatives. Excluded from a count of the homeless, according to the U.S. Department of Education guidelines, are children living in foster homes and in trailer parks with adequate, long-term accommodations; children incarcerated for violations of the law; and children of migrant workers, as whole classes, who are living doubled-up.

Data Collection

Following institutional review of this project to ensure the protection of human subjects, mail survey methodology was used to obtain the data for this study. The sampling frame included all public schools in the state and all known homeless shelters, Community Action Program agencies, County General Relief Offices, Transitional Housing Programs, County Department of Human Services offices, and miscellaneous outreach programs such as providers of health care for the homeless.

Schools were asked to identify all homeless children known to them during the academic year of the study (1997). All other data sources in the sample were asked to provide information about each homeless person served during a 1-month period, between March 15 and April 15, 1997.

Request for participation in the study was made over the signature of the Director of the State Department of Education. Intensive follow-up with nonrespondents occurred through regular mail, e-mail, and telephone contact. Once the questionnaires were returned, all data were entered into an SPSS system file, checked for data entry errors, and then prepared for analysis.

This study does not adjust for the hidden homeless. The institutional nature of the survey precluded any easy measure of the homeless who do not use services. Although our data count only those homeless persons who availed themselves of specific services, methods such as capture-recapture (Thompson, 1992, p. 212) are better adapted to estimating the elusive population segment of the homeless that does not come into contact with the agency and school support infrastructure.

Data Analysis

The first step in data analysis was the elimination of likely duplicates, followed by an estimate of the total number of incidents of homelessness

statewide (which subsequently was disaggregated at the individual county level), and an estimation of the total number of homeless individuals statewide. Figure 1 illustrates the data management pathway that was pursued through all phases of the study.

Elimination of Reporting Duplications

The process of controlling for duplication took place in three stages: first within the data provided by schools, then within the data provided by participating agencies, and finally between the school sample and the agency sample. Each agency and school participating in the study was asked to provide the first four letters of the person's last name and the last four digits of their SS#, thereby permitting a "unique identifier" to be created for each reported homeless person by combining these two elements. The unique identifier was used to locate and remove multiple data lines representing a single individual. The agency and school data sets each were scanned separately for internal duplications prior to combining the two to complete a final duplication scan.

Schools Data

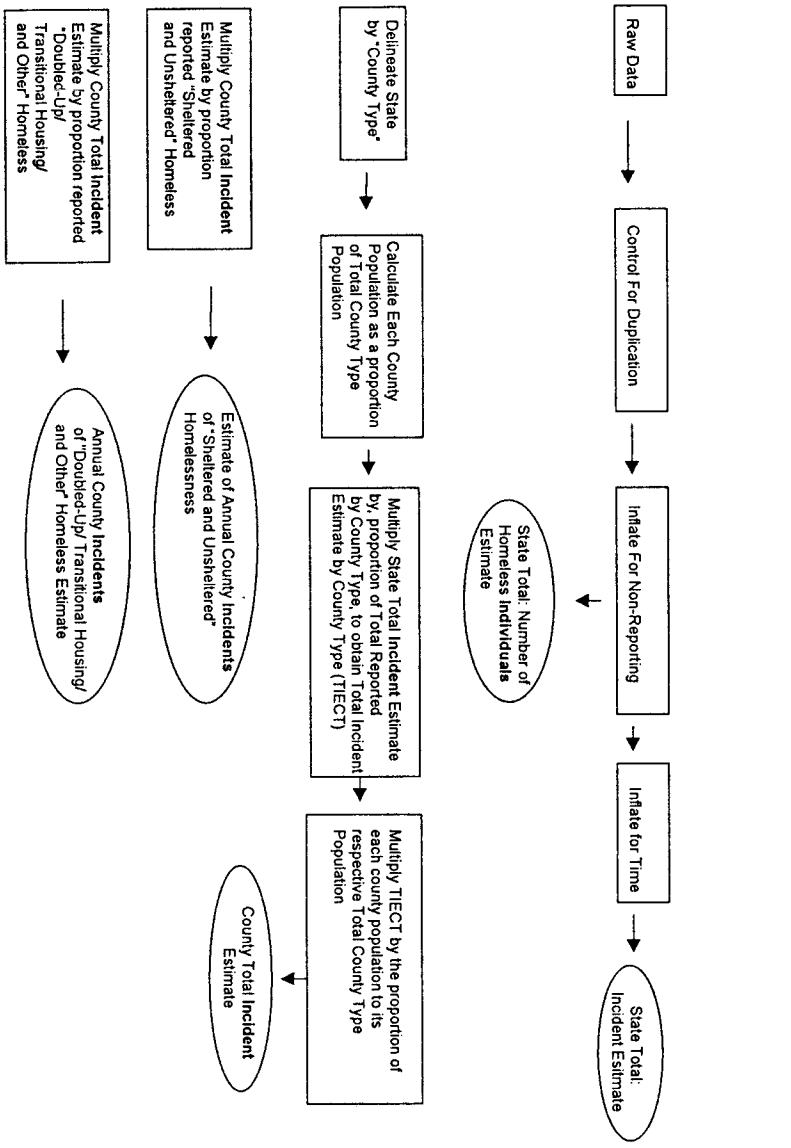
Data from the responding schools were entered in the file SCHOOLS. Each data line was checked against similar data lines. When a unique identifier appeared more than once the first data line was coded 0 (unduplicated data line) and the other(s) was (were) coded 99 (indicating a duplicate data line). An algorithm was created to facilitate assessment of the probable duplication status for the data lines that were missing one or both components of the unique identifier. The eight variables used in the sort were ascribed individual weights to facilitate the coding of data lines with missing elements of the unique identifier. The resulting scoring algorithm included name (5 points), SS# (5 points), age (3 points), gender (1 point), race (1 point), county (1 point), district (1 point), and building (1 point).

When a data line was missing either the name or SS# identifier, the available variable (i.e., either name or SS# identifier) was checked against similar data lines to assess likely duplication status and was assigned a code number ranging in value between 5 and 18. The code number was produced by adding the weighted values of each matching variable. When a data line was missing both name and SS# information, it was coded 88 (unknown).

Agency Data

Data from the responding agencies were entered in the file AGENCIES. Each data line was checked against similar data lines. When a unique identifier appeared more than once the first data line was coded 0 (unduplicated data line) and the other(s) was (were) coded 99 (duplicate data line). Another algorithm was created to facilitate the assessment of probable duplication status for the data lines that were missing one or both components of the unique identifier. Seven variables used in the sort were ascribed individual weights to facilitate the coding of data lines with missing elements of the unique identifier. The scoring algorithm for the agency data included name (5 points), SS# (5 points), age (3 points), gender (1 point), race (1 point), county (1 point), and agency (1 point). Using exactly the same process that was employed with the schools data, except that a code number ranging in value from 5 to 17 was used for the agency responses, the agency data were scanned for possible duplicate records.

Figure 1
Flow-Chart Depicting the Procedures Used to Obtain Annual Statewide Estimate of Homeless Individuals and Statewide and County Estimates of Incidents of Homelessness



After the schools and agencies data sets were scanned separately to screen for duplications, the two data sets then were merged to produce a combined MERGE1 data set. The process for removal of duplications was repeated, searching this time for duplications between the AGENCIES and SCHOOLS data sets. When a unique identifier appeared between the AGENCIES and SCHOOLS data sets more than once the first data line was coded 0 (unduplicated data line) and the others were coded 99 (duplicate data line). For this screening the six variables used in the sort were ascribed individual weights to facilitate the coding of data lines with missing elements of the "unique identifier," and the resulting scoring algorithm included name (5 points), SS# (5 points), age (3 points), gender (1 point), race (1 point), and county (1 point). When a data line was missing either name or Social Security information, the available variable (i.e., either name or SS#) was checked against similar data lines to assess its likely duplication status and was assigned a code number ranging from 5 to 16 produced by adding the weighted values of each matching variable. The next step in removing duplications from the data set involved producing low, middle, and high estimates based on alternative assumptions made regarding the probability of duplication:

MERGE2 (low)

This is the most conservative unduplicated estimate. It assumes that all weighted coded items are duplicates; therefore 1/2 of all such paired entries were recoded to the value of 0 (nonduplicate), and 1/2 were recoded to the value of 99 (duplicate). All items coded 99 were then deleted. All items coded 88 (unknown) also were deleted.

MERGE3 (middle)

This is a middle-range unduplicated estimate. Items coded from 5 to 10 were assumed to be nonduplicative and then were recoded to the value of 0 (nonduplicate). Items coded from 11 to 18 were assumed to be duplicates, so 1/2 of all such pairs were recoded to the value of 0 (nonduplicate), and 1/2 were recoded to the value of 99. All items coded 99 (duplicate) were deleted. All items coded 88 (unknown) also were deleted.

MERGE4 (high)

This is the least conservative unduplicated estimate. It assumes that all items coded 88 (unknown) and with values from 5 to 18 were nonduplicates and therefore were retained in the data set. Items coded 99 (duplicate) were deleted.

Inflating for Nonreporting

Due to the low response rate (54% overall) it was necessary to make adjustments for nonreporting institutions. Response rate adjustments were calculated using reciprocals of the response rates of the schools, the shelters, and the remaining agencies (including General Relief programs, Department of Human Services offices, Community Action Programs, Transitional Housing providers, and other miscellaneous programs). The response rate adjustment for shelters was refined further by utilizing shelter-bed capacity information.

Shelters

For each of the shelters surveyed in this study the number of available beds per shelter was obtained. Then the shelter-bed capacity rate (SBCR) was calculated for the responding shelters. The SBCR is a ratio of the number of reported clients for 1 month to the number of available beds on any given night.

For the middle-range estimate the proportion was 1,481/1,236, producing a SBCR of 1.201. For the high estimate the proportion was 1,672/1,413, producing a SBCR of 1.185. The low, middle, and high categories were maintained throughout this process. This process was followed to arrive at different counts of the number of unduplicated shelter data lines predicated on different assumptions regarding the likelihood of duplication:

SheltM2 = The total number of unduplicated data lines reported by shelters in the MERGE2 data set.
SheltM3 = The total number of unduplicated data lines reported by shelters in the MERGE3 data set.
SheltM4 = The total number of unduplicated data lines reported by shelters in the MERGE4 data set.
Low estimate: SheltM2 + 0
Midrange estimate: SheltM3 + [SBCR*(shelter bed capacity for nonreporting shelters /2)]
High estimate: SheltM4 + (SBCR*shelter bed capacity for nonreporting shelters)

Given the lack of clear information regarding the association between nonresponding agencies and the phenomenon we are attempting to measure, we have constructed our estimates based on three alternative assumptions, none of which is inherently more or less plausible, but each of which provides the basis for constructing a range of alternative values that may come closer to containing the true but unknown values that we are estimating. This process mimics, using the limited information available in these data, the procedure followed by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in determining a range of alternative possible values for population projections. This is not an ideal solution, since the inferences of nonresponses are based on available responses rather than on resampling, which was not practicable.

Our low estimate assumes that the nonreporting shelters had zero homeless to report; therefore the raw number reported was not adjusted. The midrange estimate assumes that, on average, one-half of the nonreporting shelters maintained the same shelter-bed capacity as the reporting shelters during the reporting period, and that one-half of the nonreporting shelters had zero homeless to report. The high estimate assumes that all of the nonreporting agencies maintained the same shelter-bed capacity as the reporting shelters during the reporting period.

Other Participating Agencies

For other (nonshelter) agencies, a similar process was followed, although no adjustment similar to the SBCR was available. This resulted in a range of three possible results under alternative assumptions:

AgencM2 = The total number of unduplicated data lines reported by nonshelter agencies in the MERGE2 data set.
AgencM3 = The total number of unduplicated data lines reported by nonshelter agencies in the MERGE3 data set.
AgencM4 = The total number of unduplicated data lines reported by nonshelter agencies in the MERGE4 data set.
Low estimate: AgencM2 + 0
Midrange estimate: .5 [AgencM3*{(1/ response rate) + 1}]
High estimate: AgencM4*(1/ response rate)

In these equations for other participating agencies, the response rate is the response rate for all agencies except shelters. The low estimate assumes that the nonreporting agencies had zero homeless to report; therefore the raw number reported was not adjusted. The mid-range estimate assumes that one-half of the nonreporting agencies had, on average, the same number of homeless as the reporting agencies during the reporting period, while the other one-half of the nonreporting agencies had zero homeless to report. The high estimate assumes that nonreporting agencies, on average, had the same average number of homeless reported by the reporting agencies.

Schools

For schools, a process was followed comparable to that employed with the nonshelter agency data. Again, there was nothing comparable to the shelter-bed capacity correction ratio:

SchoolM2 = The total number of unduplicated data lines reported by schools in the MERGE2 data set.
SchoolM3 = The total number of unduplicated data lines reported by schools in the MERGE3 data set.
SchoolM4 = The total number of unduplicated data lines reported by schools in the MERGE4 data set.
Low estimate: SchoolM2 + 0
Midrange estimate: .5 [SchoolM3*{(1/response rate) +1}]
High estimate: SchoolM4*(1/response rate)

For the schools equations the response rate is the response rate for the schools. The low estimate assumes that the nonreporting schools had zero homeless to report. The midrange estimate assumes that one-half of the nonreporting schools had, on average, the same number of homeless as the reporting schools during the reporting period, while the other one-half of the nonreporting schools had zero homeless to report. The high estimate assumes that, on average, the nonreporting schools had the same average number of reported homeless provided by the reporting schools.

Inflating for Time

The data provided by agencies covered a 1-month period, while the data provided by schools were for the 1996–97 school year, including summer session. To produce an annualized estimate of incidents of homelessness, an inflation equation was applied to the agency and shelter data. The use of 12 as the time inflation factor assumes that the reporting period represents an average number of homeless in a given month of a 12-month period. It is important to note that this adjustment for time was made after the data already had been corrected for possible duplications, so the annual total does not contain duplicate cases. Although this multiplication factor of 12 is arbitrary, it is consistent with an assumption supported by local and state-level homeless care providers that the 1-month shelter and agency data are representative of the entire year (in other words, that the inflow of homeless individuals from mid-March to mid-April is about the same as for any other 1-month interval). Nine different inflated totals were possible:

3a (low) = 2a (low) * 12
3a (mid) = 2a (mid) * 12
3a (high) = 2a (high) * 12
3b (low) = 2b (low) * 12
3b (mid) = 2b (mid) * 12
3b (high) = 2b (high) * 12
3c (low) = 2c (low)
3c (mid) = 2c (mid)
3c (high) = 2c (high)

To produce total state estimates of incidents, the estimates for shelters, agencies, and schools were summed across the respective low, middle, and high range categories.

Total State low estimate of incidents (all categories) = 3a (low) + 3b (low) + 3c low)
Total State midrange estimate of incidents (all categories) = 3a (mid) + 3b (mid) + 3c (mid)
Total State high estimate of incidents (all categories) = 3a (high) + 3b (high) + 3c high)

Following the above steps we arrived at a statewide estimate of the number of annual incidents of homelessness, doubling-up, and "other" definitional categories. This result does not translate directly into an estimate of the number of homeless individuals. However, this number is valuable in explaining something about homelessness in rural areas where no homeless were reported and are difficult to account for in any other way because most are living in doubled-up situations. In addition, this number reveals something more about homelessness at the individual county level, whereas the statewide estimated number reflects the total number of homeless across the state, but cannot be separated by individual county.

County-Level Estimates of Incidents of Homelessness

The 99 counties in the state were divided into three categories (Bruner, 1993): large metro counties (in which the largest population center has ≥50,000+ people), small metro counties (in which the largest population center has ≥5,000 and <49,999 people), and rural counties (in which the largest population center has <5,000 people). There are 8 large metro counties, which together contain 42% of the total state population, 45 small metro counties, representing 40% of the total state population, and 46 rural counties, which account for 18% of the total state population. For each of the 99 counties, the individual county population was calculated as a proportion of the total county-type population to provide a basis for allocating the estimated incidents of homelessness across counties. For example, the total county-type population for the large metro counties is 1,183,275. Therefore, we divided the population of each of the 8 large metro counties by 1,183,275.

A proportion of the state total population was calculated for each of the three county types. This proportion was multiplied by the state total estimate to produce a number for each of the three county types. The total number for each county type then was multiplied by the proportion of each county to its respective county-type population to obtain a total county estimate of the number of

incidents of homelessness in all definitional categories of homelessness during the year of the study for each of the 99 counties. For example, for each of the 99 counties, the total county estimate was multiplied by the proportion reported "homeless" (those currently living "on-the-street," in shelters, in single-room occupancies, or in transitional housing for the mentally ill) in the raw data to obtain the estimate of annual county incidents of homelessness in these categories.

Estimating the Statewide Total Number of Homeless

The estimate of the statewide total number of homeless is based upon the total unduplicated number of homeless reported by the various agencies, which was combined with the number of homeless children reported by the schools during the year of this study, and makes the assumption that one-third of those reported by the agencies are homeless chronically (i.e., they would experience on average 12 annual incidents of homelessness), one-third are homeless episodically (i.e., they would experience on average 6 annual incidents of homelessness), and one-third were homeless only once (i.e., they would experience 1 annual incident of homelessness) during the year of this study (in support of this assumption, see Hopper, 1995; Link et al., 1995; Piliavin et al., 1996; Rossi, 1991; Sosin et al., 1990; and Wright & Devine, 1995). This approach recognizes the reality, as expressed by Wong et al. (1997, p. 442), of "the dynamic character of the homeless experience" and of "a homeless population that is relatively transient, some of whom recycle between the streets, shelter, and conventional housing."

To verify further this approach to deriving a statewide estimate of the number of homeless persons, we attempted other methods for estimating the total number of homeless, all based upon our baseline unduplicated reported count. One approach was to develop a hypothetical 12-month trend line that reflected fluctuations in homelessness based upon external factors such as the weather. Another was to use a common, unscientific "quick and dirty" estimation of 1% of the total population being homeless during any given, undefined time period. Both of these produced approximately the same estimated statewide annual number of homeless as the one-third/one-third/one-third formula, and resulted in a number that logically is less than the estimated total number of incidents of homelessness statewide.

Findings

These methodologies, when applied to a statewide study of homelessness, resulted in the following findings. Table 1 reports the response rates for all schools and other agencies participating in this study. The response rate for schools was 55.2%. The response rate for all agencies combined was 49.2%. The overall response rate was 53.8%. Although the overall response rate is modest, it is acceptable by conventional standards. The data were not amenable to resampling (double sampling) of the nonresponding entities (Thompson, 1992, pp. 144–145) nor to other alternative approaches such as Z-score substitution, largely because of the emphasis in this study on the need to ensure unduplicated data. In addition, there was no practicable way to resample from the nonresponding agencies, as they already had been recontacted at least once, and many simply never responded to multiple requests for information. No readily applicable data or procedures were available to use in an effort to determine the

degree of nonrepresentativeness of the nonresponding entities, but the use of resampling certainly is to be encouraged in future studies endeavoring to estimate the extent of homelessness. In general, we followed Thompson's (1992, p. 5) maxim that "perhaps the best advice is to keep nonresponse rates as low as possible." Our stratification of the sampling frame and use of different assumptions related to nonresponse were employed to address the strong possibility that nonrespondents may not be typical of the population as a whole and that our estimates of population totals correspondingly would be biased. Since it was unknown to what extent the probability of responding was related to the characteristic to be measured—the count of homeless individuals or the estimation of episodes of homelessness—a logical alternative was to apply alternative assumptions in our estimation efforts. The analytical problems associated with the bias inherent in previous studies of homeless populations are explicated nicely by Wong et al. (1997).

Table 1
Response Rates

Data Source	Number Sent	Number Returned	Response Rate
Schools	1,560	861	55.2%
Homeless shelters	82	47	57.3%
General relief	101	35	34.7%
County Dept. of Human Services Offices	104	73	70.2%
Community action agencies	119	52	43.7%
Transitional housing programs	32	6	18.8%
Miscellaneous	15	10	66.7%
TOTAL	2,013	1,084	53.8%[a]

Note: [a] This number is not the average of all response rates; it is calculated as the number of questionnaires returned from all sources divided by the total number of questionnaires sent.

From the 1,881 homeless persons identified by the schools, 53 were found to be likely duplicates and were removed from the data set, leaving 1,828 unduplicated cases in the school data. From the 3,665 homeless identified by the agencies and shelters, 479 duplicates/unknowns were discovered and removed from the agency and shelter data sets, leaving 3,186 unduplicated cases. When the data sets were merged 31 additional duplicates were eliminated, leaving a total of 4,983 unduplicated reported cases of homelessness. Approximately 10% of the total reported number of homeless persons were duplications.

Table 2 reports the unduplicated numbers used in deriving estimates of the number of homeless. Using the low, middle, and high estimation methodology, these findings estimate an unduplicated reported number of homeless of between 4,824 and 5,291. Using 4,983 (the midrange estimate) as

the unduplicated reported number upon which to base a total estimate, the resulting estimated number of homeless is 26,298 statewide.

Table 2
Unduplicated Reported Number of Homeless in All Categories

	M2 (Low)	M3 (Midrange)	M4 (High)
Shelters	1,435	1,481	1,672
Agencies	1,667	1,697	1,774
Schools	1,726	1,805	1,845
TOTAL	**4,828**	**4,983**	**5,291**

The midrange estimated number of homeless persons was used in deriving the inflated estimation of the number of incidents of homelessness when the reported frequencies were adjusted for time. The lower-range estimate of the number of incidents of homelessness is 38,950, the midrange estimate is 59,558, and the highest estimate is 83,502. When examining the geography of the homeless problem, as determined by the county types (large metropolitan, small metropolitan, and rural), 71.8% of the total unduplicated number of homeless persons are determined to be in the large metropolitan counties, 23.6% in the small metropolitan counties, and 4.6% in the rural counties.

Table 3 summarizes the reported numbers of homeless by categories and the estimated annual incidents of homelessness for each county. County type refers to whether a county is a large metropolitan county (1), a small metropolitan county (2), or a rural county (3). The first column of data is the actual reported number of homeless living on the streets, in abandoned buildings, in public or private shelters, in transitional housing for the mentally ill, and in single-room occupancy facilities (n = 1,850). The second column is the estimate of annual incidents of this type of homelessness (n = 23,890). The third column is the number of doubled-up with family/friends, those in transitional housing, youth group homes, or their own home or apartment, and those in the other/unknown and other categories (n = 3,133). Column 4 is the estimate of the annual incidents of this type of homelessness (n = 35,672). Column 5 is the total reported number of all types of homelessness (n = 4,983). Column 6 is the mid-range estimate of the total number of incidents of all types of homelessness (n = 59,562). The last column reports state population by county, with a total state population of 2,841,764. These findings indicate that 40.1% of the homeless are among those who are among the sheltered/nonsheltered homeless (i.e., living in abandoned buildings, on the streets, etc.), and 59.9% are living doubled-up, in transitional housing, and in other circumstances (such as in cars, in campgrounds, etc.).

Table 4 summarizes the population traits of all categories of the homeless, based upon the three county types. This table indicates that 71.8% of the homeless are in the large metropolitan counties and are almost equally male and female. Additionally, 55% are less than 18 years of age, 70% are White, and 90% are non-Hispanic.

Table 3
Summary of Reported Numbers by Response Categories[a] and Estimate of the Annual Number of Incidents[b] of Homelessness

		Definitional Categories of Homelessness[c]						
		Sheltered and Unsheltered Homeless[d]		Doubled-Up/Transitional Housing/Other[e]		Combined Sheltered/ Unsheltered/Doubled-Up/ Transitional Housing/Other[f]		
County Type[g]	County Number	Reported Number	Est. of Annual Incidents	Reported Number	Est. of Annual Incidents	Reported Number	Est. of Annual Incidents[h]	County Pop.
3	1	0	18	0	27	0	45	8,286
3	2	0	10	0	14	0	24	4,500
3	3	0	30	3	45	3	75	14,079
2	4	0	67	1	100	1	167	13,674
3	5	0	15	0	22	0	37	6,875
2	6	0	119	14	177	14	296	24,137
1	7	125	1,783	181	2,664	306	4,447	123,077
2	8	0	125	12	187	12	312	25,502
2	9	1	114	8	170	9	284	23,218
2	10	1	105	11	156	12	261	21,294
2	11	1	99	16	147	17	246	20,065
3	12	0	34	4	50	4	84	15,745
3	13	0	25	0	37	0	62	11,430
2	14	3	106	5	159	8	265	21,603
2	15	0	74	9	110	9	184	15,047
3	16	1	38	9	57	10	95	17,682
2	17	9	229	59	342	68	571	46,633
2	18	0	67	5	100	5	167	13,591
3	19	0	29	11	43	11	72	13,429
3	20	0	17	1	26	1	43	8,136
2	21	2	86	27	128	29	214	17,412
3	22	0	40	19	60	19	100	18,833
2	23	29	250	40	373	69	623	50,889
2	24	0	81	3	121	3	202	16,461
2	25	1	162	1	242	2	404	32,947
3	26	0	18	0	27	0	45	8,539
3	27	0	18	0	26	0	44	8,177
2	28	0	90	1	135	1	225	18,394
2	29	11	210	81	313	92	523	42,679
3	30	1	34	3	50	4	84	15,664
1	31	16	1,283	29	1,917	45	3,200	88,566
2	32	3	55	7	82	10	137	11,153
2	33	2	107	14	160	16	267	21,799
2	34	0	82	0	122	0	204	16,603
3	35	1	24	8	36	9	60	11,106
3	36	0	17	3	26	3	43	8,097
3	37	0	22	4	32	4	54	10,080
3	38	0	26	0	39	0	65	12,303
3	39	2	24	2	37	4	61	11,406
2	40	0	80	0	119	0	199	16,193
3	41	0	26	0	39	0	65	12,184
2	42	0	92	30	137	30	229	18,685
3	43	0	32	2	48	2	80	15,115

Table 3 (Continued)
Summary of Reported Numbers by Response Categories[a] and Estimate of the Annual Number of Incidents[b] of Homelessness

County Type[g]	County Number	Reported Number	Est. of Annual Incidents	Reported Number	Est. of Annual Incidents	Reported Number	Est. of Annual Incidents[h]	County Pop.
2	44	0	97	10	145	10	242	19,826
3	45	0	21	0	32	0	53	9,887
3	46	1	22	10	33	11	55	10,284
3	47	0	18	7	26	7	44	8,193
3	48	0	33	0	49	0	82	15,193
2	49	1	99	8	148	9	247	20,120
2	50	0	173	22	258	22	431	35,163
2	51	0	83	5	123	5	206	16,829
1	52	64	1,468	166	2,192	230	3,660	101,291
2	53	0	100	25	149	28	249	20,273
3	54	0	28	5	37	5	62	11,564
2	55	11	89	22	133	33	222	18,147
2	56	13	192	19	287	32	479	39,130
1	57	332	2,587	439	3,864	771	6,451	178,559
3	58	0	25	19	38	19	63	11,793
3	59	0	19	7	29	7	48	9,015
3	60	0	26	2	38	2	64	11,890
3	61	0	29	2	43	2	72	13,490
2	62	6	108	1	161	7	269	21,927
2	63	1	153	7	228	8	381	31,102
2	64	0	190	0	283	0	473	38,627
3	65	0	30	12	44	12	74	13,802
3	66	0	24	5	36	5	60	11,129
3	67	0	21	0	32	0	53	9,968
3	68	0	18	4	26	4	44	8,177
2	69	0	59	0	88	0	147	11,939
2	70	86	204	19	304	105	508	41,435
3	71	0	33	0	49	0	82	15,349
3	72	0	15	0	23	0	38	7,077
2	73	0	82	0	122	0	204	16,676
3	74	0	22	4	33	4	55	10,200
2	75	0	119	0	178	0	297	24,220
3	76	0	20	0	29	0	49	9,119
1	77	441	5,065	840	7,565	1,281	12,630	349,560
1	78	90	1,213	31	1,812	121	3,025	83,701
2	79	0	93	2	140	2	233	19,014
3	80	0	12	3	17	3	29	5,373
3	81	0	26	0	39	0	65	12,087
1	82	283	2,270	308	3,391	591	5,661	156,694
2	83	0	64	1	96	1	160	13,089
2	84	17	154	20	230	37	384	31,398
2	85	108	367	12	548	120	915	74,638
3	86	2	38	8	57	10	95	17,878
3	87	0	15	1	23	1	38	7,152
2	88	0	61	10	91	10	152	12,416
3	89	1	17	37	25	38	42	7,767
2	90	55	176	136	262	191	438	35,770
2	91	1	191	4	286	5	477	38,940
2	92	2	101	46	150	48	251	20,508

Table 3 (Continued)
Summary of Reported Numbers by Response Categories[a] and Estimate of the Annual Number of Incidents[b] of Homelessness

County Type[g]	County Number	Reported Number	Est. of Annual Incidents	Reported Number	Est. of Annual Incidents	Reported Number	Est. of Annual Incidents[h]	County Pop.
3	93	0	15	0	22	0	37	6,866
2	94	65	193	21	288	86	481	39,206
3	95	0	26	2	38	2	64	11,900
2	96	0	103	12	155	12	258	21,058
1	97	61	1,475	171	2,204	232	3,679	101,827
3	98	0	17	0	25	0	42	7,926
3	99	0	31	22	46	22	77	14,314
TOTALS		**1,850**	**23,890**	**3,133**	**35,672**	**4,983**	**59,562**	**2,841,764**

Notes: [a] Categories of homeless were determined from available response categories from which respondents were able to choose.

[b] An incident of homelessness refers to one episode, of indeterminate length between 1 and 30 days, of homelessness for one individual. Each incident, by definition, is mutually exclusive of all other incidents of homelessness for the individual in question. For example, if an individual is homeless for an entire year, this is interpreted as 12 incidents of homelessness.

Beginning with the reported numbers of people provided by the shelter and agency data, and after adjusting for nonreporting, a multiplier of 12 was used to inflate the reported number of homeless in order to produce a number of annual incidents of homelessness. This number does not directly translate into an estimate of the number of homeless individuals because it is impossible to determine how many incidents of homelessness any individual may have experienced during the year for which data were collected. Thus, although a county may have reported zero homeless persons by using an incidence estimation it is possible to project actual occurrences of homelessness based upon other pertinent information.

[c] These categories represent those available to respondents as reflected by the operational definition of homelessness used in this study.

[d] Homeless: living on the streets and abandoned buildings (n = 130); living in public/private shelters (n = 1,720); living in transitional housing for the mentally ill (n = 44); and living in single room occupancy facilities (n = 105).

[e] Doubled-up with family/friends (n = 1,680); transitional housing (n = 704); youth group home (n = 80); own home/apt. (n = 278); other/unknown (n = 242)

[f] A combination of all categories of homelessness available to respondents.

[g] 1 = large metropolitan county (with at least one population center in excess of 50,000); 2 = small metropolitan county (with the largest population center falling between 5,000 and 49,999); 3 = rural county (with the largest population center less than 5,000).

[h] Estimate of annual incidents of homelessness and estimate of annual incidents of doubling-up/other categories do not always equal total estimate of annual estimate of annual incidents due to rounding errors.

The data were subdivided into various categories of homelessness to examine the underlying causal factors. Based upon the reported numbers of those who are either sheltered or unsheltered (n = 1,999), the category of domestic violence and family disruption accounted for 29% of the causal factors in this population of the homeless, followed by employment or other economic problems (22%) and evictions (12%). For those living doubled-up, in transitional housing, and in other living circumstances (n = 2,984), 33% reported domestic violence or other family disruptions as the primary cause of their homelessness, while 23% reported employment or economic difficulties and 10% reported an eviction.

Combining all categories of homelessness, 31% of the total population were homeless as a result of domestic abuse or family-related difficulties, 22.5% were homeless because of employment or economic problems, and 11.1% reported being homeless as a result of an eviction.

Table 4
Demography of Homeless Population for All Definitional Categories of Homelessness by County Type

	Large Metro Counties	Small Metro Counties	Rural Counties	State Total
Gender				
Male	1,806	604	127	2,537
Female	1,764	574	101	2,439
Unknown	7	0	0	7
Total	3,577	1,178	228	4,983
Age				
1–4 years	412	92	18	522
5–10 years	973	287	46	1,306
11–13 years	259	105	15	379
14–17 years	299	188	51	538
18+ years	1,536	474	80	2,090
Unknown	98	32	18	148
Total				4,983
Race				
White	2,315	965	211	3,491
Black	749	88	7	844
Asian/Pacific Islander	26	9	0	35
Native American/ American Indian	77	2	4	83
Biracial	215	36	2	253
Unknown	195	78	4	277
Total				4,983
Hispanic Origin				
Yes	331	95	12	438
No	3,220	1,070	216	4,506
Unknown	26	12	0	39
Total				4,983

Concerning the household types characterizing the sheltered and the unsheltered homeless, based on n = 1,999 available responses, 39% were unaccompanied adults and 20% constituted single-parent households. Eight percent belonged to two-parent households, and the household characteristics of the remaining homeless persons were unknown. The household types of those living doubled-up, in transitional housing, or in other circumstances (n = 2,984) indicate that 35% of these were from single-parent households, and 15% were

unaccompanied single adults. About 8% were from two-parent households, and the household type for the remainder was unknown. When combining all categories of homelessness for adults, 27.5% of all cases were from single-parent households, and 27% were single males. Eight percent were from two-parent households, and the household type for the remainder was unknown.

Discussion and Recommendations

This study developed and then applied new methodologies for studying homelessness at the statewide level. These methodologies were pursued in an attempt to address the problem of duplication in reports that commonly plagues larger studies of homelessness, and with their use we have endeavored to broaden the understanding of homelessness by developing a means for estimating the number of incidents of homelessness as well as for estimating an annual number of homeless persons.

Many schools in the school-based portion of the institutional sampling frame responded to the study by indicating to the researchers that they rarely have homeless children anymore because they have a tight safety net in place whereby children are "caught" before actual homelessness occurs. Other schools responded that they do not have any (or are not aware of any) homeless children. Nevertheless, 55% of the total number of reported homeless are children and youth <18 years of age. Most likely this finding somehow is woven into the fact that the cause of homelessness is so frequently traceable to domestic abuse and family-related difficulties. Mothers will take their children with them when they leave an abusive family situation, and youth will run away from abusive families, but the schools may not necessarily be aware of these circumstances.

The number of homeless estimated in this study, and the number of incidents of homelessness they experience, could change rapidly and unpredictably, depending upon several factors, such as the sparsely tested effects of the welfare reform initiatives implemented at the individual state level. Further, until the domestic assault problem and other problems of family disruption are addressed, there always will be a group of women and children, and to a lesser extent men, who become homeless because of family violence and other severe family problems. Additionally, the issues of employment and adequate wages as well as housing availability are all relevant to any discussion of homelessness, and these are very fluid issues that rise and fall based upon various other events such as the cost of living in a given community. Each of these is a homeless policy issue.

There also is much to be learned from the research process undertaken in this study, beginning with the chronic difficulties associated with mediocre response rates when studies of the homeless are undertaken. The response rate could be improved dramatically if statewide and local homeless coalitions actively and directly were to encourage their constituencies to participate fully in these studies. The numbers provided to researchers are all they have to work with in analyzing the scope of homelessness, no matter what methodology is employed, and better response rates will assist immeasurably in understanding the dimensions of homelessness.

Mandatory reporting of homelessness is another issue that comes forward from this research endeavor. Many states already require this. While the state in which this research was conducted does not mandate reporting of homelessness, the question has been raised and continues to be debated. The advantages of

mandatory reporting include: building a comprehensive, existing database of reported homeless that would include trends and variations within a given year as well as across all years; a reduction in the number of times in a given year that agencies would be required to provide data on the clients they have served; a dramatic reduction in the number of duplications reported; and providing a means whereby the homeless history of individuals could be tracked, thereby generating very valuable information to be used in directing program resources and available block grant money.

Those who oppose mandatory reporting include representatives and supporters of agencies and organizations that are fully self-supporting, often with a religious orientation, and that do not use public money for their operating expenses. They often believe that this exempts them from reporting on the activities of their agencies or on the numbers or characteristics of their clientele. Others opposing mandatory reporting are found among the leaders of agencies that provide shelter for domestic assault victims. These care providers cite acute concerns about confidentiality issues, fearing that if identifying information about their clientele becomes part of a larger data base then their safety cannot be assured.

However, the strongest opposition to mandatory reporting of the homeless is predicated on philosophical beliefs, often emerging from those of a civil libertarian orientation who question the need for accountability and oppose government acting as a watchdog over the provision of social services. Those who feel this way generally believe in providing hospitality for those in need and in fiercely protecting the privacy and free choices available to the homeless individuals involved. This perspective legitimately holds that mandatory reporting violates the civil rights of their clients and that it is unethical to share information with government sources or with researchers.

Resting somewhere in the middle of this policy debate is the question of the role of the social scientist who is charged with providing good research results that permit the maximum amount of correct documentation of the scope of homelessness and the characteristics of those who are homeless. This question of the proper role of the social science researcher cannot be answered directly by this research, but the methodologies presented in this paper can advance the ability of social researchers to examine the homeless problem more meticulously.

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Notes

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[1] An incident of homelessness refers to 1 episode of homelessness of indeterminate length between 1 and 31 days for one individual. Each incident is, by definition, mutually exclusive of all other incidents (i.e., an individual who is homeless for an entire year has experienced 12 incidents of homelessness.)

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