

2. Need for an Unduplicated Accounting of Homeless Services

The number of homeless Americans appears to have dramatically increased in recent years, but no one actually knows the current number of homeless persons and counting them and understanding their service utilization patterns may not be as easy as it may first seem. At stake are resource allocations, program evaluations, and billions of dollars necessary for managing and resolving what may be one of the most serious social and economic crises of our time.

2.1 Examples of increases in the numbers of homeless Americans

Numerous anecdotal examples illustrate that the numbers of homeless Americans seem to be increasing over time and that related spending has reached dramatic heights.

HUD's Emergency Shelter Grants program funds resources for basic shelter and essential supportive services by awarding grants to state governments, large cities, urban counties, and U.S. territories. These awards totaled \$10 million in 1987 and had grown to \$115 million by 1997, with continued increases thereafter [3].

A report from the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless in 2005 that addressed the overflow of shelters in Cleveland Ohio, asserted that shelter costs in 2004 was 5.6 times the cost 10 years earlier for men and 9.4 times the cost 10 years earlier for women [4]. They predicted further increases over the next 10 years due to increased demand and warned that at the current rate of increased demand, county and city public sector funding will be exhausted.

A 2001 study of 27 U.S. cities reported that 37% of all requests for emergency shelters and 52% of all requests for emergency shelters from families were unmet in that year due to a lack of resources [5].

In April 2002, over 33,000 homeless people were provided emergency shelter each night by the New York City Department of Homeless Services [6]. This was the highest number they had recorded, and the cost of homelessness rose to record heights as well. According to a report by the New York City Independent Budget Office, New York City agencies spent almost \$1 billion on homelessness in Fiscal Year 2001 [7].

Congress appropriated over \$1 billion dollars to homeless assistance programs in the Fiscal Year 2002 HUD Appropriations Act [8].

2.2 Congress directs HUD to report on homeless service utilization

In response to noted increases in homelessness, which seem to reflect a growing social and economic crisis, Congress deemed it critical for the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development ("HUD") to work with local jurisdictions to develop an unduplicated accounting of homeless service utilization. Congress directed HUD to perform an unduplicated count² of homeless persons sufficient to provide annual reports to the Committee on

2 The term "unduplicated count" is misleading. In ordinary language it tends to imply that the answer is a single number. In terms of the Congressional directive, it is actually an unduplicated accounting of shelter visits –i.e., the distinct visit patterns of each client across shelters.

Appropriations documenting the demographics and utilization patterns of homeless persons based on collected count data [8][9].

In the Fiscal Year 2002 HUD Appropriations Act, Congress allocated \$2 million dollars specifically to continue work on a homeless data collection and analysis project that had begun the year before in the Fiscal Year 2001 HUD Appropriations Act [10]. This project seeks to document the demographics of homelessness, identify patterns in service utilization, and record the effectiveness of assistance programs. The work reported herein describes a way to achieve the unduplicated accounting within this data collection and analysis project.

2.3 Earlier attempts to count the number of homeless Americans

There have been previous attempts to count the number of homeless Americans by counting the number of people who are in shelters or on the streets at a given point in time.

On March 20, 1990, federal employees of the U.S. Bureau of the Census, in satisfaction of their duties as set forth in the U.S. Constitution, attempted to determine the exact number of Americans in the U.S. population by physically verifying the existence of each person, including an attempt to count every homeless person and gather related demographics [11]. Under this effort, termed Shelter-and-Street night, thousands of federal employees visited homeless shelters, inexpensive hotels, all-night eating establishments, bus stations, street corners and various urban places identified by local jurisdictions as places where homeless people are likely to be found. Employees were instructed not to ask who was homeless and not to awaken any persons found sleeping. Instead, they were told to count all visible persons (including children) found in these places and record demographics as either provided or as they appeared to the census taker. These efforts were able to add 240,140 homeless people to the official census count.

A more comprehensive estimate was provided by the Urban Institute using the 1996 National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients [12]. The survey was designed to provide information about the providers of homeless assistance and the characteristics of homeless persons who used services by sampling 76 metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, including small cities and rural areas at two points in the year. On a given night in February, 842,000 in 637,000 households were found homeless. On a given night in October, 444,000 people in 346,000 households were found homeless. Converting these point counts into a national annual projection, researchers at the Urban Institute estimated that between 2.3 and 3.5 million people were homeless in that year [13].

2.4 Limits of point-in-time counts

Point-in-time studies, like those mentioned above, give a limited static picture by only counting those who are homeless at specific places during a narrow slice of time. No explicitly-identifying person-specific information is necessarily collected, so double-counting can occur when clients use more than one service (i.e., appear at more than one point) during the capture period. An example is a client receiving meals at one facility and lodging at another during the same night; such a person may be counted once, twice, or not at all. Seasonal and climate variation may be missed altogether. Important differences in client circumstances may not be captured. For example, the frequency and lengths of time in which particular clients are in and out of homelessness is typically not captured by a point-in-time count. Prolonged unemployment, sudden loss of a job, lack of affordable housing, and domestic violence contribute to episodes of homelessness, while severe mental illness and addiction disorders often account for chronic homelessness. For these reasons, point-in-time studies may misrepresent the magnitude and nature of homelessness.