

Geography of Homelessness, Part 2: Prevalence of Homelessness

In part one of Geography of Homelessness we examined the extent to which homelessness exists in urban and rural areas. It showed that an overwhelming majority of the number of people experiencing homelessness in the United States are experiencing it in urban areas. While it is unsurprising that there would be more homeless people in urban areas, the issue of prevalence is one that has been less definitive. Nationally, rural areas have higher rates of poverty, deep poverty and unemployment, factors commonly associated with homelessness.¹ In this second in a series of briefs examining the geography of homelessness, we take a closer look at Continua of Care (CoCs) to examine how rates of homelessness in rural areas compare to those in urban areas. To do this, we calculated rates of homelessness for each CoC using 2007 homelessness counts (the last year for which comprehensive data are available), and U.S. Census data.

Rate of Homelessness by Geographic Category

Each CoC has been classified into one of five geographic categories, Rural, Mostly Rural, Urban-Rural mix, Mostly Urban, and Urban (see: Geography of Homelessness: Defining the Spectrum for the category definitions). In addition to the calculations for each CoC, the rates for each geographic type were calculated. Collectively, Urban CoCs have the highest rate of homelessness, with approximately 29 people per 10,000. Mostly Urban CoCs rank second with a rate of 19 homeless people per 10,000, and Rural areas fall third with 14 people per 10,000 (see figure 1).

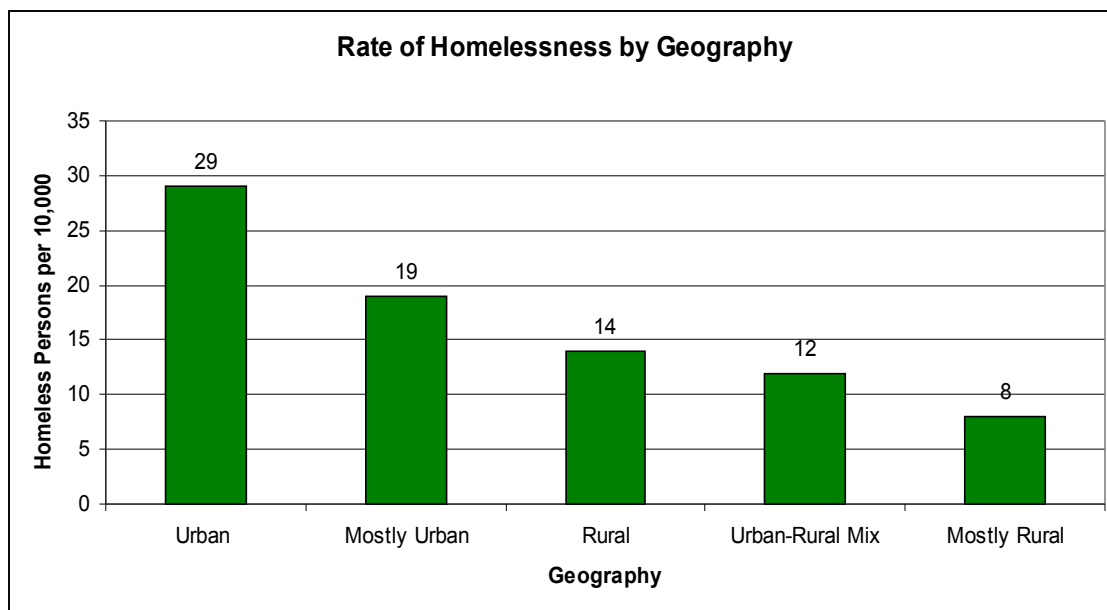


Figure 1. Homeless Persons per 10,000 by Geographic Category

There are some Rural CoCs with very high rates of homelessness, and two of the highest rates in the country belong to rural CoCs (see Table 1). However, the rates of homelessness within the rural category vary widely (wider than any other category), and as a group, Rural CoCs have a

¹ Homeless Assistance Council, *Poverty in Rural America*. June, 2006.

rate of only half that of Urban CoCs. There are a number of explanations for the observed rate of homelessness being lower than what might have been expected: many extremely poor people in rural areas do not stay in shelters but rather double-up with family or friends or live in substandard housing, and many leave rural areas in search of increased employment opportunities and homeless services. While rural areas certainly have poverty to contend with – 1 in 5 rural counties have rates of poverty over 20 percent – homelessness as HUD defines it is less prevalent in these areas than in urban areas.²

Overall Distribution of CoCs by Rate of Homelessness

We found that the rates of homelessness in the United States vary widely, from less than 1 person per 10,000 to over 216 people per 10,000. Figure 2 shows the distribution of CoCs by their rate of homelessness. While there is a wide distribution, most CoCs (91 percent) have rates of fewer than 50 persons per 10,000, and almost one-third had rates between 10 and 20 people per 10,000.

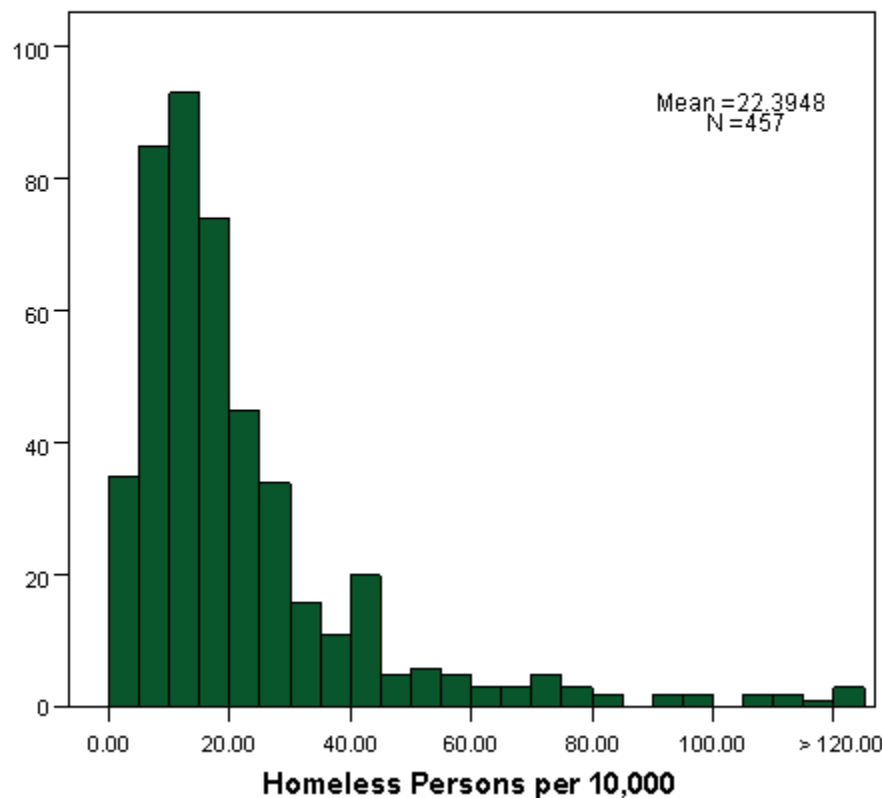


Figure 2. Distribution of CoC Homeless Rates

² <http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/IncomePovertyWelfare/ruralpoverty/>

Continua of Care with Highest Rates of Homelessness

Though the mean rate of homelessness is just under 23 persons per 10,000, there are a number of CoCs with very high rates – the ten highest have rates between 96 and 216 people per 10,000. While 7 out of 10 of the highest rates of homelessness are urban, only 3 are big cities. Detroit, MI has the highest rate of homelessness in the United States, with over 216 people per 10,000. Mendocino County, CA and Monroe County, FL, both rural CoCs, follow at second and third with 161 people per 10,000 and 147 homeless people per 10,000 respectively. The following tables outline the CoCs with the highest rates of homelessness as well as the CoCs with the highest numbers of homeless people. Detroit, MI is the only CoC to appear in both tables.

Table 1. CoCs with Highest Rates of Homelessness

<i>Highest Rates of Homelessness</i>			
Geography	Continuum of Care	Rate	Total Homelessness 2007
Urban	Detroit, MI	216.0	18,062
Rural	Mendocino County, CA	161.3	1,422
Rural	Monroe County, FL	146.9	1,121
Urban	Portland, ME	116.0	741
Urban	Watsonville/Santa Cruz City & County, CA	111.7	2,789
Mostly Rural	Central Oregon	110.5	2,029
Urban	Merced City & County, CA	109.3	2,641
Urban	Santa Maria/Santa Barbara County, CA	106.1	4,253
Urban	Boston, MA	98.0	5,104
Urban	District of Columbia	96.6	5,320

Table 2. CoCs with Highest Numbers of People Experiencing Homelessness

<i>Highest Number of Homeless People</i>			
Geography	Continuum of Care	Rate	Total Homeless
Urban	Los Angeles City & County, CA	75.0	68,608
Urban	New York City, NY	61.9	50,372
Urban	Detroit, MI	216.0	18,062
Urban	Las Vegas/Clark County, NV	66.7	11,417
Urban-Rural Mix	Texas Balance of State	18.7	10,636
Urban	Houston/Harris County	24.9	10,363
Urban-Rural Mix	Georgia Balance of State	16.8	10,255
Urban	Metropolitan Denver Homeless Initiative, CO	34.2	8,698
Urban	Phoenix/Mesa/Maricopa County Regional, AZ	23.2	8,448
Urban	Seattle/King County, WA	44.1	7,902

The Geography of Homelessness series aims to address a number of questions regarding the spatial characteristics of homelessness. The following questions will be addressed in upcoming briefs:

- How do aspects of homeless assistance systems (including emergency shelter beds, transitional housing beds, funding levels, and unmet needs) vary by geography?
- Are members of subgroups (such as families, unsheltered, chronically homeless) counted in certain geography types more than others?
- To what extent are people experiencing homelessness in urban areas located in major cities as compared with other urban areas such as suburbs and small cities?
- Have certain geographic types (such as rural CoCs, suburbs, and cities) experience greater rates of change in their homeless populations?
- Do CoCs that have similar homelessness characteristics share other economic characteristics such as poverty rates and levels of housing affordability?