

## **Comment on Dennis P. Culhane et al.'s “Public Shelter Admission Rates in Philadelphia and New York City: The Implications of Turnover for Sheltered Population Counts”**

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In late 1991, when I first began gathering examples of computerized data systems capable of unduplicating counts of service users across all homeless facilities in a jurisdiction over time, I was shocked and a bit reluctant to believe the turnover rates these systems produced. Several jurisdictions reported serving 5, 6, or even 10 times as many people (unduplicated) during the course of a year as they served on an average night. While I did make some use of these data in a manual on techniques for counting the homeless (Burt 1992b), most of the systems tracked families only, not single homeless persons, and I did not fully focus on the implications should these patterns hold for the total homeless population.

Since that time, the number of jurisdictions capable of producing unduplicated systemwide counts for a year or longer for singles as well as families has grown (although they can still be counted on two hands). The evidence has mounted that the early data were not flukes, nor were they typical only of homeless families rather than of single homeless persons. Dennis Culhane and his colleagues have documented turnover rates for Philadelphia at the level I encountered in other systems (six times a year and higher). Turnover rates for New York City are lower but in some ways can be taken as illustrative of a system operating strictly on demand.

Before commenting on the implications of these data for public policy, I want to do three things: (1) place the New York City and Philadelphia data in the context of comparable data from other jurisdictions that represent a wider variety of locales, (2) raise some considerations about who are left out of these data, and (3) discuss the implications of constraints on shelter beds and on length of stay for interpretations of the Culhane et al. counts and those from similar computerized shelter-based systems.

## The New York City and Philadelphia data in context

Some people may react to data from the nation's two largest northeastern cities—New York City and Philadelphia—as so atypical of the country as a whole that we should not use them as the basis for policy decisions. I therefore have assembled data from as many systems as I know of that have a reasonably stable and consistent tracking database. This information, presented in table 1, allows us to place the New York City and Philadelphia data in context.

The jurisdiction and the 12-month period covered are shown in the first two columns. The next two columns present the numbers generated by these jurisdictions' tracking databases, first for the total number of (unduplicated) *persons* served during the 12-month period and then for the total number of *family households*. This second set of numbers includes only what are considered family households by the data collection systems; these family households almost always include at least one child. The next two columns translate the numbers into percentages (rates per 100), using as the denominator the *total number* of the jurisdiction's persons or families with children (from 1990 census figures). The final two columns make the same translation into percentages, but use the number of *poor* persons or families with children as the denominator. The New York City and Philadelphia data from Culhane et al. appear in the first two rows, followed by data from seven other jurisdictions or systems, including two states (New Hampshire and Rhode Island) and several city-county catchment areas. The jurisdictions include two in the Midwest, two in New England, one in the South, and two in the West; collectively they provide a variety of economic and regional circumstances to compare with those of New York City and Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup>

I want to make two main points from these data: (1) The New York City and Philadelphia rates are within the range of rates documented in other cities—they are not extreme; and (2) the

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<sup>1</sup> The data from nine counties in the San Francisco Bay area are included because they come from a computerized state data system, run through the welfare department, that registers all families eligible for Aid to Families with Dependent Children who receive emergency housing assistance. Homebase, the publisher of these data, maintains that all recipients were homeless when they received assistance, but the very high rates produced by this system raise questions about this categorization, especially in relation to the poverty population. The data are included in table 1 because, whether or not we believe recipients of this assistance would meet accepted definitions of homelessness, they certainly are low-income persons in need of housing assistance.

*Table 1. Unduplicated Annual Data from Jurisdictions with Jurisdiction-Wide Coverage and Capacity to Unduplicate*

Jurisdiction	Period Covered	Number of Homeless		Number as a Percentage of Total		Number as a Percentage of Poor	
		Persons	Family Households <sup>a</sup>	Persons	Family Households <sup>a</sup>	Persons	Family Households <sup>a</sup>
New York City (Culhane et al. 1994)	1992	85,916	18,220	1.17	2.32	6.08	8.10
Philadelphia (Culhane et al. 1994)	June 1991 to May 1992	15,241	2,134 <sup>b</sup>	0.96	1.32	4.74	4.48
Columbus/Franklin County, OH (CALLVAC Services 1993)	July 1992 to June 1993	4,919	851	0.78, 0.51 <sup>c</sup>	1.12, 0.70 <sup>c</sup>	4.52, 3.93 <sup>c</sup>	5.39, 4.88 <sup>c</sup>
St. Paul/Ramsey County, MN (Chase 1993)	1992	5,778	665	2.12, 1.19 <sup>c</sup>	2.11, 1.10 <sup>c</sup>	12.71, 10.43 <sup>c</sup>	9.66, 7.80 <sup>c</sup>
Los Angeles County (Shelter Partnership 1993)	July 1991 to June 1992	174,185	19,272	1.97	1.86	13.02	9.87
New Hampshire (NH Dept. of Health and Human Services 1992)	1992	3,294	272	0.30	0.19	4.64	2.93
Rhode Island (RI Emerg. Food and Shelter Board 1992) <sup>d</sup>	1991	4,275	692	0.43	0.59	4.44	4.81
Louisville/Jefferson County, KY (Crouch 1993)	1992	NA	360	NA	1.19, 0.43 <sup>c</sup>	NA	3.58, 3.87 <sup>c</sup>

*Table 1. Unduplicated Annual Data from Jurisdictions with Jurisdiction-Wide Coverage and Capacity to Unduplicate (continued)*

Jurisdiction	Period Covered	Number of Homeless		Number as a Percentage of Total		Number as a Percentage of Poor	
		Persons	Family Households <sup>a</sup>	Persons	Family Households <sup>a</sup>	Persons	Family Households <sup>a</sup>
San Francisco Bay Area— 9 counties (Homebase 1993) <sup>e</sup>	1990	NA	23,944	NA	3.33	NA	33.81

*Note:* NA = not available.

<sup>a</sup> Households with children present, since the vast majority of homeless family households fit this description, and some jurisdictions use the presence of children as their definition of a family household.

<sup>b</sup> Dennis Culhane, personal communication, April 1994.

<sup>c</sup> First percentage uses city population as denominator; second percentage uses county population as denominator. These systems serve the whole county, but the vast bulk of the homeless probably come from the city and not from the balance of the county, so I give percentages calculated both ways.

<sup>d</sup> Published data interpolated to obtain best estimate of unduplicated counts.

<sup>e</sup> This database probably registers nonhomeless people who receive temporary housing assistance even though it is considered an “emergency” housing fund.

variation in rates among cities is considerably reduced when one uses the poor population, or poor families with children, as the denominator rather than the total population.

A glance down the four rightmost columns reveals that Philadelphia and New York City have neither the highest nor the lowest annual rates among these jurisdictions. As Culhane and colleagues point out for Philadelphia and New York City, the use of annual data appears to smooth out considerable differences in shelter capacity and turnover rate between cities. For the jurisdictions in which the system covers both a city and a county that extends beyond the city borders, rates are higher with the city population as the denominator but still impressive with the total county population as the denominator.

It is common to use the total population (or total number of families with children) in calculating homeless rates, as shown in columns 5 and 6. However, it is a reasonable assumption that all or most persons who become homeless were poor before homelessness occurred, and therefore a more policy-relevant rate is the proportion of *poor* persons who experience homelessness during a given period. The rates for all homeless persons (column 5) use the total population of a jurisdiction as the denominator and vary by a factor of 7 from the lowest to the highest (0.30 to 2.12). However, if only the poor population of the jurisdiction is used as the denominator (column 7), the variation among jurisdictions shrinks considerably, to only a factor of 3 (4.44 to 13.02). Performing the same comparisons of rates across jurisdictions for homeless *families* produces a factor of 12 when the denominator is all families with children (0.19 to 2.32, omitting the San Francisco Bay area counties), but again a factor of 3 when only poor families with children are included in the denominator (2.93 to 9.87, again excluding the San Francisco Bay counties).

All in all, data from other jurisdictions indicate that the New York City and Philadelphia data presented by Culhane and colleagues are generally in line with the experience of other cities in other regions of the country.

### **How many homeless persons do these systems miss?**

Culhane and colleagues comment that the New York City and Philadelphia shelter-based data systems do not account for all homeless persons, for three reasons: (1) There are privately operated shelters whose users are not registered in the

computerized data system; (2) in these two cities, persons staying in transitional shelters are not included in the counts; (3) many persons (more than 10,000 in New York City and more than 1,000 in Philadelphia) are found on the streets rather than in shelters. However, while shelter-based methods will always miss some people, these potential failings of the data systems are unlikely to result in serious underestimates because of the long time frame of the tracking databases.

The persons entering privately operated shelters in these cities will be missed by the computerized systems if they use only the privately operated shelters and have never registered for city-supported shelter. On the basis of my knowledge of how the privately run shelters in these two jurisdictions operate, that may be a reasonable assumption about many of those using privately operated shelters, but not all. Some privately run shelters are transitional or specialized (e.g., for families or for the mentally ill) and thus are likely to receive clients referred from the public systems. There is also the question of whether it is fair to generalize patterns of stay in city-supported shelters to those operated privately outside the city systems. I do not know the actual shelter patterns, but if length of stay is significantly different (either longer or shorter) in the private shelters from that in the public ones, one cannot make a simple projection of numbers missed based on bed counts alone.

The omission of transitional shelter stayers from the New York City and Philadelphia databases is probably not a serious source of undercounting. The vast majority of people entering transitional shelters in these cities have come from emergency shelters, and therefore each tracking system will include them in its totals.

Similarly, the omission of street homeless from these tracking systems is unlikely to result in a substantial undercount. Cross-sectional studies that ask about past service use find that many homeless persons who are found on the streets during a one-night count have used a shelter recently. For example, Farr, Koegel, and Burnam (1986) found that 49 percent of homeless persons located at street congregating sites during the daytime had used a shelter bed during the past month; Burt and Cohen (1989) found that 35 percent of homeless persons located at such congregating sites during the early evening hours had used a shelter during the previous week; and SMS Research (1992) found that although only about 18 percent of Hawaii's homeless had used a shelter on the night before they were counted, almost 90 percent had used a shelter at least once during the past year.

These data suggest that sizable proportions of the street population in urban areas have used shelters at some time and are likely to be included in the long-term tracking systems described by Culhane and colleagues.

None of this should diminish the startling nature of Culhane et al.'s findings. Their numbers are high enough to cause serious rethinking of the antecedents, and possible antidotes, to homelessness. My remarks are meant, rather, to remind the reader that it is treacherous to draw inferences from a combination of longitudinal and cross-sectional data without taking great care with one's assumptions.

### **Constraints on demand and their implications**

In any system of limited services (such as a fixed number of shelter beds), if people stay longer, fewer new people can come in. Conversely, if length-of-stay rules force people to move out after very short stays, more people can be served during a year. Assuming that everyone stays for the full length of time allowable and that every bed is filled again as soon as it is vacant, a system with 100 beds will serve 1,200 persons a year if stays are limited to 30 days, but only 400 a year if the limit is 90 days.

Most homeless shelter systems maintain a fixed supply of beds, and most shelters have some length-of-stay limitations. New York City is the exception, because "right to shelter" operating procedures leave it with no restrictions on length of stay and no limit on the number of persons accommodated. More than anywhere else in the country, New York City's shelter capacity expands to meet demand. Therefore the four-month average stay can be assumed to reflect how much time homeless persons in New York City need to get themselves back into some kind of housing, given the city's very constrained low-cost housing market.<sup>2</sup> The total number of persons served can be assumed to provide some realistic reflection of the vulnerability to homelessness of the city's larger population.

In most of the other jurisdictions included in table 1, shelters maintain some type of maximum length of stay—usually 60 or 90 days. Average stays appear to be somewhat shorter than the maximums, but it is not unreasonable to assume that knowledge of the maximum affects the behavior of shelter stayers.

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<sup>2</sup> This assumes that most exits from the New York City shelter system represent transitions to a more permanent domicile, not moves to private shelters or the streets.

One might be tempted to conclude that turnover rates are spurious numbers, driven exclusively by length-of-stay rules. I believe this is the wrong conclusion, *given* that a vacated shelter bed is filled rather quickly with another clearly homeless person. Such quick replacement seems to occur in all cities for which we have data. Shorter maximum shelter stays give more people the opportunity to be counted by the system, since they force beds to be vacated and therefore make them available to be refilled. But in most of these jurisdictions the average stay is significantly shorter than the maximum allowable stay. Average stays in jurisdictions other than New York City run from three months (Los Angeles) to six to eight weeks (Philadelphia) to as little as two weeks (families in Rhode Island), suggesting that most people use shelters for quite brief periods.

The similarity of rates for different cities when calculated as a percentage of the *poor* population of the jurisdictions in table 1 suggests that structural factors in U.S. cities produce a near-endless supply of needy individuals and families to take advantage of any shelter vacancies that occur. These people are clearly homeless and therefore appropriate to count. Their short average stays may reflect either the temporary, though obviously serious, nature of their housing crisis or the relative availability of housing in the different cities. Future research should examine where people go when they leave shelter and whether their housing situation could have been stabilized without their having to pass through the shelter system.

## **How service structures influence levels of homelessness**

This section discusses how the nature of the service system influences perceived levels of homelessness and about distortions that may arise both from letting people enter a shelter and from taking steps to keep them out.

When we use the shelter system, or any system of organized care, as the source of estimates of a population's size, whether we like it or not we end up with a *de facto* definition of that population. In the case of homelessness, a shelter stay is a defining event: A person who sleeps overnight at a shelter is homeless. But shelter systems have a dynamic of their own that may influence their attractiveness to those in precarious housing situations. The system structure may include a diversion or prevention component that screens applicants and offers some the resources to find stable housing without ever entering a

shelter. Or the system may provide services to anyone who needs housing assistance, thus inflating the numbers considered homeless by some number of people who may simply need extra money to pay rent arrears. This is what we believe happens in the San Francisco Bay area, where homelessness rates are as high as one-third of all poor families with children (table 1). It is believed that many such families receive help from a special housing assistance fund without ever becoming literally homeless.

Since the late 1980s, many shelters have added a range of services that may be attractive to some precariously housed individuals and families. Some communities will issue new Section 8 housing subsidy vouchers or certificates only to households that are in the shelter system. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least some persons using shelters do so in the hope of receiving a permanent housing subsidy voucher. Alternatively, they may come to a shelter because it is the only place they know of where they can access educational assistance, job training, help with entitlements, substance abuse treatment, and other services. Culhane and colleagues rightly raise the issue of whether it is sound public policy to load shelters with expanded services, rather than make these services available to households in the community before they reach the level of desperation that brings them to a homeless shelter.

In addition to enriching the shelter environment, which may draw people into officially defined homelessness to gain access to services, many localities are increasing their emphasis on prevention. The effect of these efforts is to divert people who have no permanent place to stay (and thus are technically homeless) away from shelters toward more stable living arrangements in conventional dwellings. Therefore they are never counted as homeless. For example, the state of New Hampshire reports that its annual homeless population (those using shelters) declined by 35 percent during three years, from 7,847 persons in 1990 to 5,065 in 1992. This decline occurred partly because those in shelters stayed longer, but mostly because the state offered assistance with finding and maintaining stable housing to 30,364 persons in 1992, compared with 12,167 in 1990 (New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services 1992). All those offered preventive services were without a regular place to stay when they applied for assistance and would have remained literally homeless (staying in shelters or on the streets) without the help provided. Thus the real level of need expanded during these three years from 20,014 to 35,429 persons. The state reported both these figures and focused on the

overall level of need for housing assistance. But it is all too easy for researchers to use the narrow definition of literal homelessness to suggest that the problem is shrinking.

In their discussion of how New York City processes family shelter applications, Culhane and colleagues note that the City also attempts to divert as many families as possible, who then are not counted as homeless (i.e., they never get into the computer system). Yet at the time of application these families would meet the most commonly used definition of literal homelessness. The larger issue for policy is, once again, the total level of need at the low end of the income distribution, rather than the count of who spends some nights in a shelter during a year's time.

### **Policy implications**

Several important policy implications derive from the data presented by Culhane and colleagues and are supported by the evidence presented in table 1. For me, the most important implication is that a very large number of people in this country appear to be vulnerable to homelessness and to experience it during the relatively short periods of one, three, or five years. The size of this vulnerable population and its consistency across jurisdictions as a fraction of the population in poverty support structural interpretations of homelessness such as those that I have presented elsewhere (Burt 1992a) and that Culhane and colleagues reiterate. Inadequate educational preparation, shrinking opportunities for well-paying jobs, growing labor market inequality, two-tier labor markets, public benefits that have lost purchasing power—all affect the ability of the nondisabled poor to make ends meet and cover housing costs.

The second implication of the larger data set I present in this comment is that numbers are tricky. When you look beyond the numbers of people who can be considered literally homeless to the evidence from several systems (e.g., New Hampshire, the San Francisco Bay area) that a great many more people are in desperate need of housing assistance, the data strongly support the interpretation that the whole band of households at the lowest end of the income distribution is in serious trouble and that policy throughout the 1980s has not succeeded in tempering the push into periodic homelessness. Certainly this interpretation is important for housing policy, in terms of the potential utility of increased subsidy support. But it is also important in many other policy arenas, such as education and employment policy. There appear to be no short-term solutions that will end

the flow of people into short periods of homelessness. Only serious long-term efforts will really address the critical issues.

The third implication is that we need differentiated approaches for the long-term homeless (many of whom suffer from serious disabilities) and the short-term homeless that Culhane and colleagues (and to a lesser extent this comment) have documented. Homeless persons with serious disabilities can be helped by a combination of permanent housing subsidies coupled with supportive services. The short-term homeless may not need the intense assessment and assistance strategies inherent in the transitional or continuum-of-care models. Increasing attention to prevention—making more needed services and resources accessible to people before they have to enter a shelter—seems a more humane and reasonable approach to helping people in emergency situations.

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