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Research Summary

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Family Homelessness in Cuyahoga County

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This paper discusses the problem of family homelessness in Cuyahoga County, and provides baseline estimates of risk and shelter use. The issue was addressed using a two-pronged approach. The first approach used data from a large, representative sample of persons living in the county to estimate how many people below the poverty level live in doubled up housing situations. Given that many people who become homeless live in doubled up housing situations prior to becoming homeless, this estimate was intended to provide a baseline estimate of possible risk of homelessness among the county's poor population. The second approach was to examine a much smaller data set, containing information on persons actually using residential homeless services. Data were provided by the Cuyahoga County Office of Homeless Services as part of a nationwide attempt to document and count the numbers of sheltered homeless persons in the United States. This analysis detailed the numbers of persons living in families in the county who used emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing facilities.

STUDY CONTEXT

The news of high rates of home foreclosures particularly in the Cleveland area, coupled with an ever-worsening economic picture for the area and nation as a whole has helped heighten concerns about possible increases in homelessness locally. Family homelessness has been an issue of particular concern primarily because of its effects on children, and efforts to end family homelessness are underway in a number of cities nationwide. Such efforts must begin with an assessment and baseline data about both those at risk for becoming homeless as well as the numbers of people and characteristics of those currently using the homeless system. Once baseline data are collected for Cuyahoga County, programs and services appropriate to the needs of local families can be developed and implemented.

The current study asks four key questions: (1) How many people are at risk for becoming homeless in Cuyahoga County? (2) What

are the characteristics of those who are at risk for homelessness? (3) How many families have entered homeless residential programs in Cuyahoga County? (4) What are the characteristics of these homeless families?

METHODS

To effectively answer our research questions we needed to take a two-pronged approach. In the first, we estimated homelessness risk among people in the county, and in the other, we analyzed available data on literal homelessness in the county.

Estimating homelessness risk. Previous research has found that many people who become homeless live with others, in what is referred to as "doubled up" housing situations prior to becoming homeless. We sought to estimate the numbers of persons in the county living in a doubled up situation. To do this, we followed the model provided by a report, *Doubled up in the*



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United States published by the National Alliance to End Homelessness in 2007. Data from the 2006 American Community Survey were used to estimate the number of people in Cuyahoga County who are potentially at risk for becoming homeless because: (1) they are living in a doubled up housing situation, and (2) the household in which they live has an income below the federal poverty level.

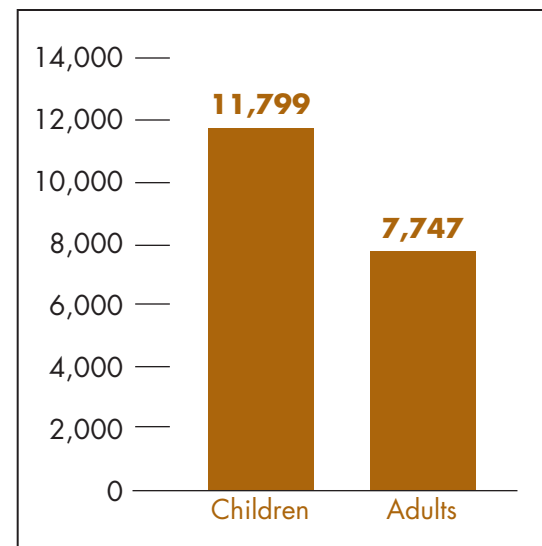
Doubled up individuals were defined as people who lived with a householder for more than three months and did not have another place to live. Children were considered doubled up if they were either living with or without their parent or guardian in another household.

Defining and examining homeless families. To determine the number and characteristics of people living in families who have entered county homeless shelters, we examined a smaller, local data set provided by the Cuyahoga County Office of Homeless Services. This data set, the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), is a nationwide system for collecting data on persons using homeless shelters and other homeless services. For the purposes of these analyses, a homeless family was defined as at least one adult (over the age of 18) accompanied by at least one child (under the age of 18) that has used emergency shelter or transitional housing in Cuyahoga County from 2005-2008 (among shelters that participate in the HMIS system—see full report for details).

RESULTS

How many people are at risk for becoming homeless in Cuyahoga County?

In 2006, an estimated 19,546 people (11,799 children and 7,747 adults) or about 10% of those living below the poverty level, lived in doubled up housing situations in Cuyahoga County. This number represents a 4.5% increase from the previous year. Of the total, 60% were children, representing 15% of the county's children and 7% of the county's adults living in poverty. Persons living in doubled up housing situations tended to live in larger, more crowded households than those who were not living doubled up, and a high proportion (more than 80%) lived in households that experienced a rent burden.



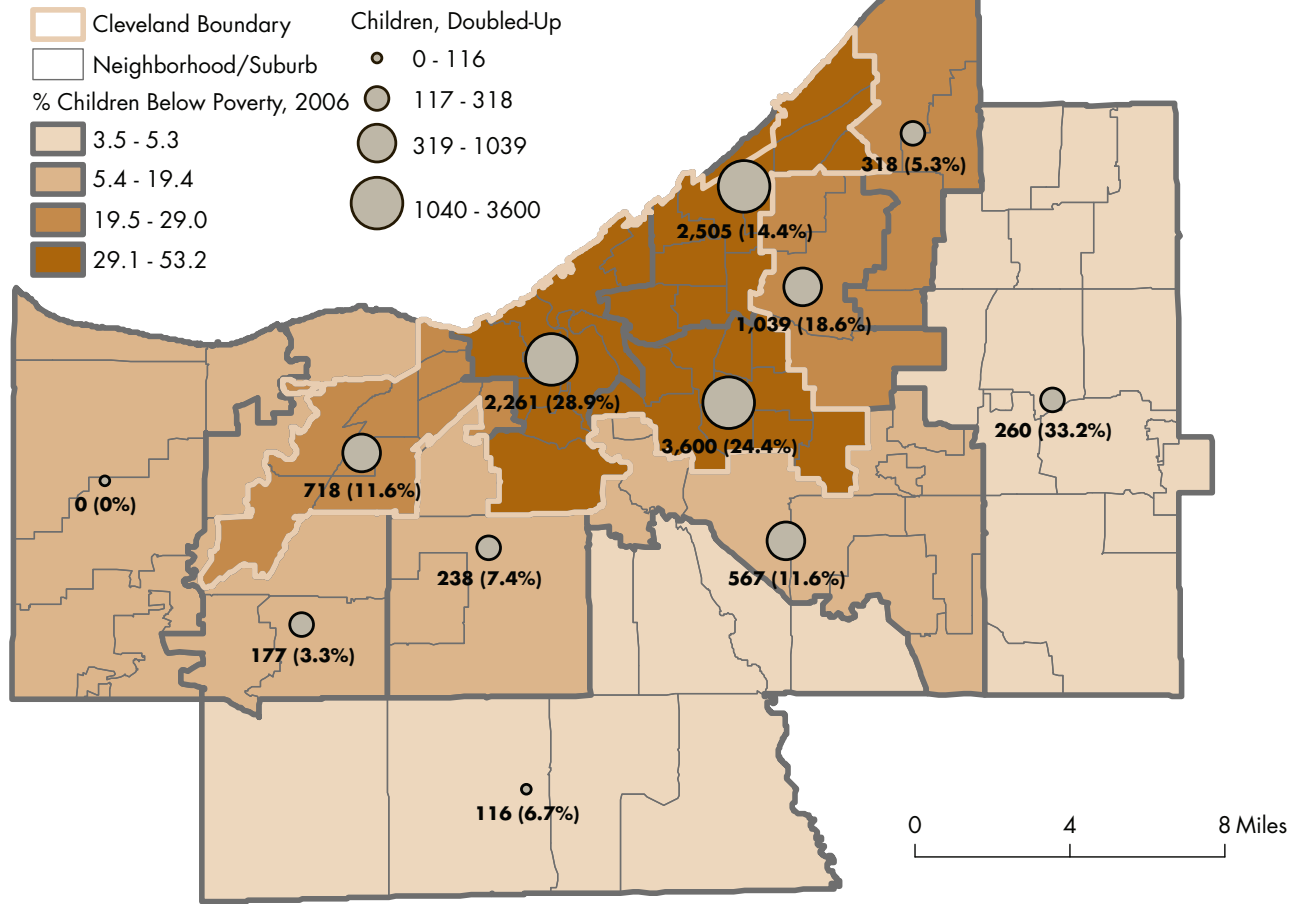
Numbers of people under the poverty line living doubled up in Cuyahoga County in 2006 (N=19,546).

Data source: 2006 American Community Survey.

Doubled up adults were about 50% African American, 58% were women, and 46% were under the age of 30. Nearly all adults living doubled up were unmarried, had no children, and most (75%) had earned at least a high school diploma, and were employed (70%).

The “typical” doubled up child was African American, and lived in the city of Cleveland with his/her grandparent(s) without his/her mother or other siblings. Doubled up children tended to live in households in which the house or apartment was rented, and for whom the annual median household income for households was \$14,590, as compared with the 2006 median income of \$41,522 for the county. Among children who were school-aged, more than 75% attended public school. The largest proportion of children living doubled up was in the city of Cleveland, but the numbers of children under the poverty level living doubled up in the inner ring suburbs and some of the outer ring suburbs were also fairly substantial.

Poor children doubled-up in Cuyahoga County by PUMA area (2006)



Data Source: 2006 American Community Survey

How many families are homeless in Cuyahoga County?

A total of 3,748 unique individuals living in 1,211 families entered county shelters between 2005 and the summer of 2008. We found that the number of families increased between 2005 and 2006 but dropped in 2007. Most (81%) persons in families entered emergency shelter facilities, 16% used transitional housing

programs, and a relatively small proportion (3%) used permanent supportive housing programs. Almost two-thirds (65%) of all individuals living in homeless families were children, and 34% of all individuals were children under the age of six.

What are the characteristics of homeless families in Cuyahoga County?

Families who find themselves homeless and use the county shelter system were typically small families headed by women accompanied by an average of two young children. Members of the families were overwhelmingly, and out of proportion with either the numbers in the population or with the numbers in the poverty population, African American. Families who become homeless were typically homeless because of economic factors, specifically lack of income, and have generally unstable and short-term housing patterns, both before their entry into shelter and after their exit. Most families

Of the 3,748 individuals in families who have entered county homeless shelters between 2005 and 2008, 65% were children, 34% of whom were under the age of six.

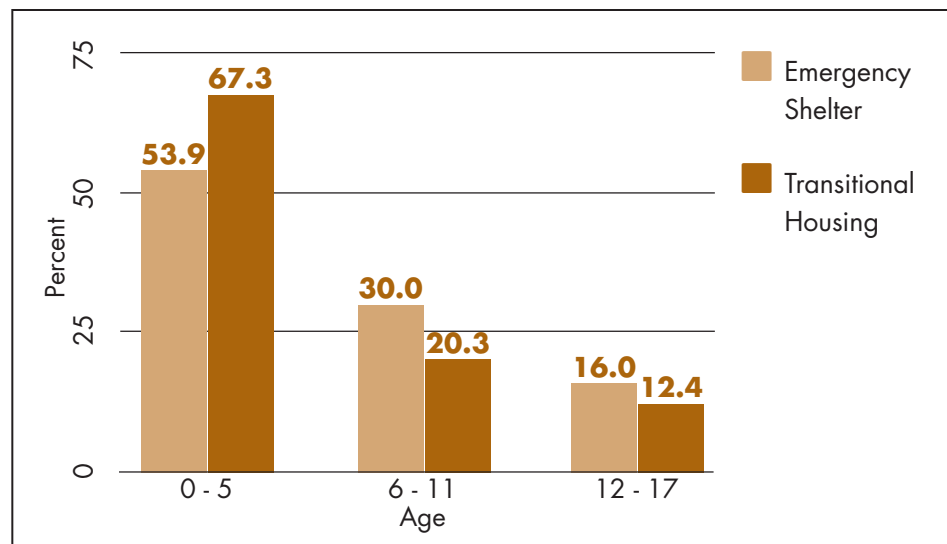
who enter into shelters do so only once and their stays are typically less than two months. However, families do not always leave shelter for more stable housing situations than the ones in which they lived prior to becoming homeless. More details about homeless families are described below.

Family size and general demographics.

We found that a typical homeless family in Cuyahoga County has three members: an adult female with two children. Most were Black/African American (85%), while a small number (15%) were White or another race, and approximately 5% identified their ethnicity as Hispanic/Latino. Most of the adults in homeless families were female (94%), and were an average of 30 years old when entering a homeless program. In contrast to single homeless adults, very few homeless adults who were living in families reported being military veterans (1.3%), 15% reported having a disability of long duration, and 16% reported being victims of domestic violence.

Why do families in Cuyahoga County become homeless and where did they live before they became homeless? Being unemployed and unable to pay their rent, the two most common reasons families gave for becoming homeless, accounted for one-third of the reported reasons. Being evicted in the previous week, and domestic violence were also commonly mentioned reasons, listed by 13% and 11% of families, respectively. Before living in a shelter, homeless families most commonly lived either doubled up with family and friends (44%), in an emergency shelter (25%), or in their own place (12%). Families' stays in their previous living situations tended to be short, with about half (47%) staying less than one month, and most (80%) staying less than three months.

Many homeless families reported that they lived in the Cleveland zip codes of 44105 and 44108 before entering shelter. These are two areas that have experienced very high home foreclosure rates. While a direct link between home foreclosure and homelessness has yet to be established, such a concentration of families



Age Groups of Homeless Children in Cuyahoga County
Source: HMIS data provided by the Cuyahoga County Office of Homeless Services.

from hard-hit areas underlines the importance of addressing the potential serious and worsening situations of particular communities that could eventually lead to homelessness.

Where do families go after they leave shelter? The most common reasons families left a county homeless shelter were because they found a housing opportunity (38.7%) or completed the program (16.9%). After leaving shelter, the living situations families most commonly reported were living in a friend or family member's room or apartment (i.e., doubled up) (27%), places unknown to shelter staff (22%), or a rental room, house, or apartment (22%). Others entered permanent housing programs for the formerly homeless (8.7%) or emergency shelter (7.5%).

How long do families stay in shelter and how often do they return to homelessness? The lengths of stays for families differed significantly with regard to which type of program they used. Because it is a shorter term program, those using emergency shelter stayed an average of 51 days, with a median of 21 days. The average stay in transitional housing programs, which tend to be longer term, more structured programs, was 216 days, with a median stay of 183 days. Seventy five percent of individuals in families used shelter only once during the three year period, 94.5% stayed either only once or twice, and 5.5% stayed three or more times in shelter, with one person staying a maximum of six times. Multiple users of the shelter system were seen predominantly in emergency shelter programs.

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IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While our data sources describe two different groups—those who are not yet but potentially at risk for becoming homeless, and those who have become homeless and use county shelters—we have begun to develop an understanding of both families at risk for becoming homeless and those who are already homeless. Establishing this baseline of local information for Cuyahoga County is crucial for local efforts to evaluate program effectiveness, reduce, and eventually end homelessness.

The continued collection and analysis of data at every stage of program planning and implementation will allow Cuyahoga County to better understand how effectively homeless programs in the community are serving families, keep families from falling through any cracks in the system, and eventually demonstrate the success of local interventions and systems changes over time. Such information can guide decisions about the best ways for policy-makers and advocates to make strategic and effective investments of limited resources.

Future research should delve more deeply into the American Community Survey data to better understand the specifics surrounding doubled up children's living situations. In particular, with whom do children and their mothers live when they do not live with grandparents, but do live with their mothers, and what are the characteristics of these households? The fact that so many households that house doubled up individuals experience serious rent burdens is of particular concern as the economy continues to weaken and jobs are lost.

Another important focus should be the outcomes for homeless families. In particular, we should seek

to understand whether families that experience homelessness are able to regain stable housing, and what factors predict such "successful" outcomes. Data must be used to support outreach to families on the verge of homelessness so that their needs can be addressed before they actually lose their homes. These efforts will ultimately both strengthen the system overall and improve services for needy families.

Among those living below 100% of the federal poverty level, an estimated 19,546 people were living in doubled up housing situations in 2006. Sixty percent of these people were children.

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Founded in 1988 as the Center on Urban Poverty and Social Change, the Center changed its name in 2006 to the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development. The Center's commitment to addressing the issues of urban poverty remains at the core of its work, as does a commitment to social change. The new name emphasizes the means through which such change must take place.

The Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development seeks to address the problems of persistent and concentrated urban poverty and is dedicated to understanding how social and economic changes affect low-income communities and their residents. Based in Cleveland at Case Western Reserve University's Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, the Center views the city as both a laboratory for building communities and producing change locally, and as a representative urban center from which nationally relevant research and policy implications can be drawn.

A community resource for expertise and data analysis for nearly 20 years, the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development created the groundbreaking community data system NEO CANDO (Northeast Ohio Community and Neighborhood Data for Organizing), a web-based tool that centralizes a broad array of indicators, making it easier to overlay and analyze disparate data. Community development corporations, foundation program officers, local governments, neighborhood activists and residents, students at the Mandel School and other institutions, the media, community reinvestment professionals and academic researchers are among those who have found NEO CANDO invaluable in their work. The Center conducts extensive training and maintains a listserv so NEO CANDO users can get the most out of its vast data collection. You can visit the NEO CANDO webpage at <http://neocando.case.edu>.



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