

America's Homeless II

Populations and Services

February 1, 2000



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Even in a booming economy, at least 2.3 million adults and children, or nearly 1 percent of the U.S. population, are likely to experience a spell of homelessness at least once during a year. This likelihood grows to 6.3 percent if one considers only people living in poverty, according to the newest national analysis of homelessness by Urban Institute researchers Martha Burt and Laudan Aron. At the same time, there is a bigger and more diverse network of homeless services than in 1987, when the Urban Institute released earlier national estimates of the homeless population.

Burt and Aron developed the new estimates from the 1996 National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC). The NSHAPC covers suburban, rural, and urban areas, and was conducted in 1996 by the U.S. Census Bureau. In December 1999, the Federal Interagency Council on the Homeless released descriptive data from the survey, but did not include population estimates. The new independent analysis by Burt and Aron provides estimates of the size of the nation's homeless population in 1996 and enables a comparison with 1987 estimates of homelessness. No local population estimates are available.

The homeless population may be underestimated in rural areas and other locations where there are no or few homeless services. After accounting for these challenges Burt and Aron characterize their results as lower-bound estimates.

Data Sources

- Survey of 6,300 program representatives, collected from programs in February 1996
- Survey of 4,200 program users/clients, collected from programs in October 1996

Client data were collected in October, while program data were collected in February. Client data were collected only from programs open in both February and October.

Programs Surveyed for Client Data in October 1996

Emergency shelters open in October

Transitional housing

Permanent housing

Voucher distribution

Rural food pantries

Soup kitchens open in October

Mobile food programs open in October

Targeted outreach programs open in October

Drop-in centers open in October

Other targeted programs open in October

The estimates take into account the amount of turnover within the homeless population, variation in the length of homeless spells, multiple contacts with homeless services by a single client, and seasonal variations in homelessness.

Underlying Challenges

- Data source: NSHAPC only includes service users
- Double-counting: people may use more than one service
- Accuracy: providers usually overestimate size of population served
- Seasonal variation: fewer programs open in October than February
- Client diversity: programs used by homeless AND non-homeless people
- Turnover: clients vary in length of homeless spells.

Taken together, the estimates bring the nation as close as possible to a full representation of homeless adults and children. The estimates yield a margin of error of plus or minus 6 percent. The estimates refer to the number of homeless (households or people) who used homeless assistance programs in an average point in time (day or week) during a month (October or February) in 1996.

Types of Estimates

Population

- Homeless Clients (households)*
- Homeless People (adults and children)

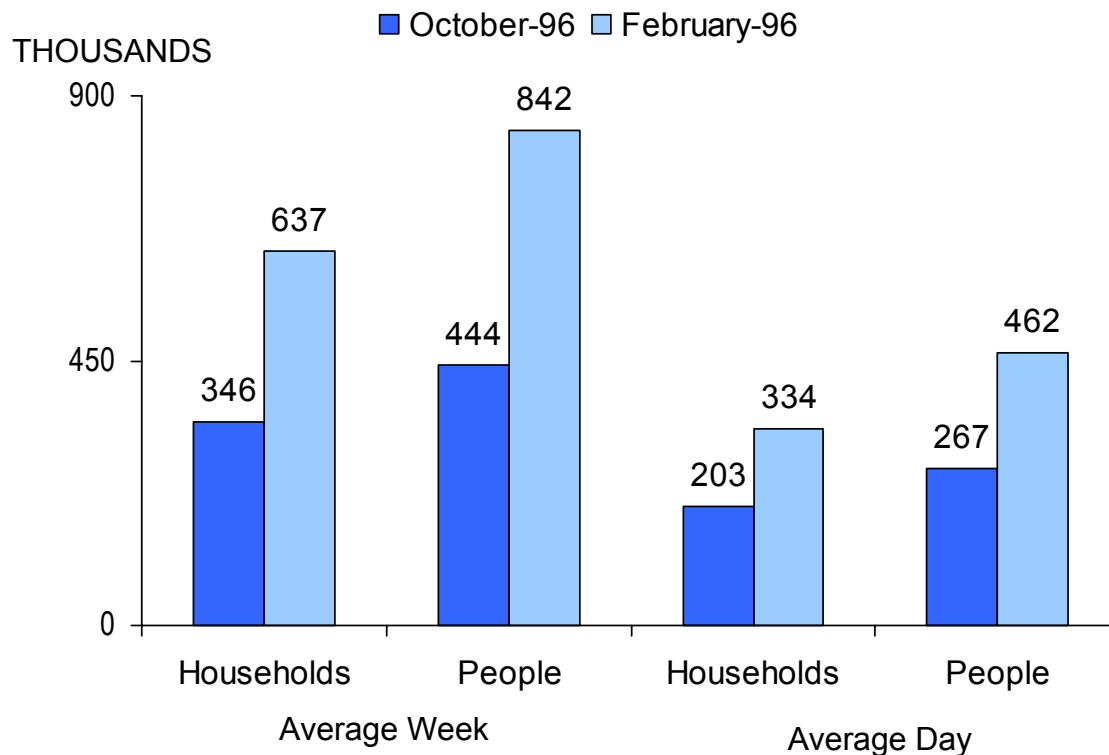
Time Period

- 7-day Estimates
- 1-day Estimates
- Annual Projections

* at least one adult

The researchers suggest that estimates of how many homeless people used homeless programs in an average week are more meaningful as an indicator of the number of homeless people than are estimates for an average day.

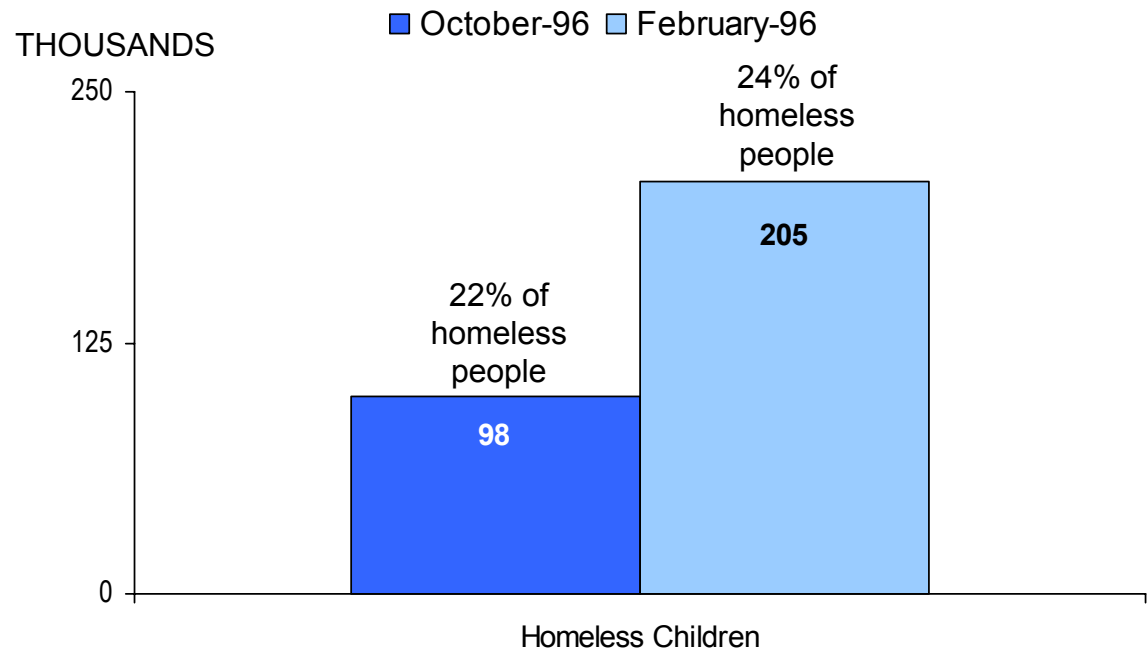
Number of Homeless Who Used Homeless Assistance Programs



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Children represent a significant share of homeless people who used homeless services.

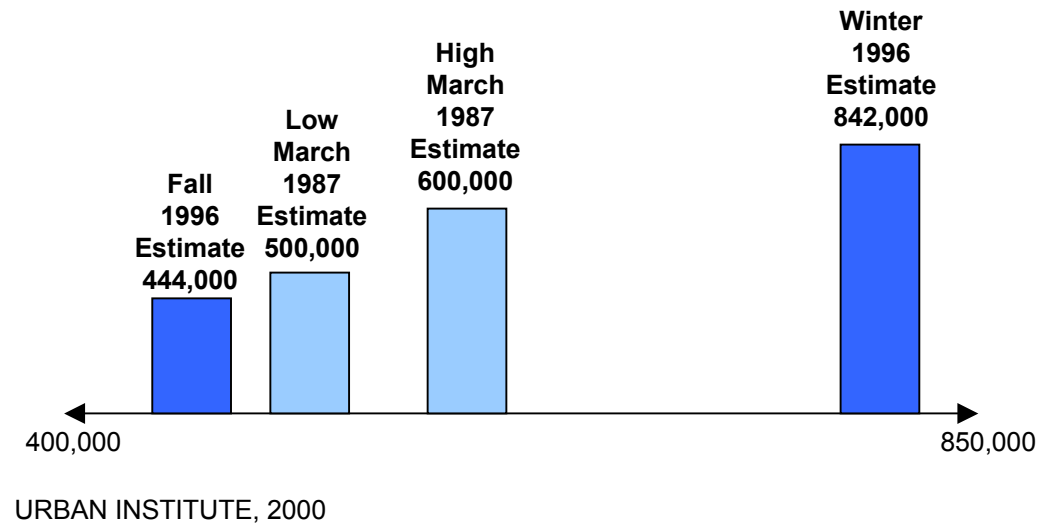
Number of Homeless Children Who Used Homeless Assistance Programs in An Average Week



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The Urban Institute's two 1996 estimates fall on either side of the 1987 estimates. After taking all assumptions into consideration, the researchers conclude that the higher 1996 estimate is more representative of the full homeless population, and that the size of the homeless population since 1987 has increased.

Range of Weekly Estimates of Homeless People Who Used Services



Client data on first-time spells of homelessness begun in the past week were used to develop annual projections. The number of such spells was multiplied by 51 (the remaining weeks in a given year) and was then added to the average week estimate. The calculation assumes that turnover is constant.

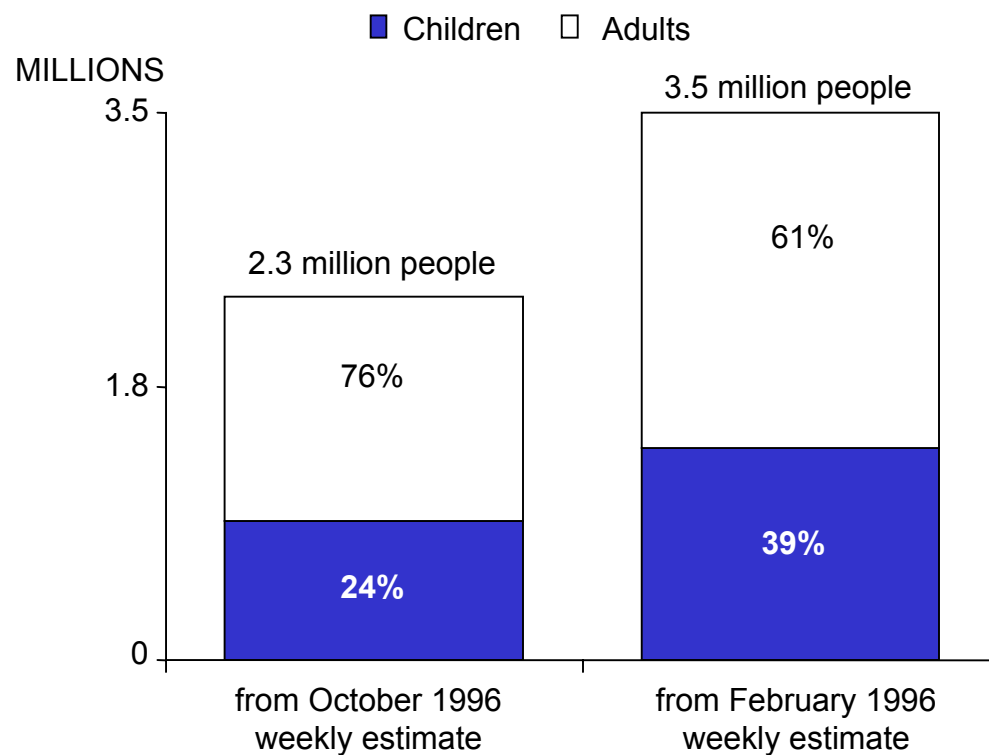
Number Likely to Be Homeless at Least Once in a Given Year

	Average Week Estimate	New Homeless Spells Begun in Last Week	Annual Projection
October 1996	444,000	36,900	2.3 million people
February 1996	842,000	52,000	3.5 million people

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Many children are likely to experience a period of homelessness at least once during a year. Childhood homelessness is a strong risk factor for adult homelessness.

Percentage of Annual Projections Likely to Be Children in a Given Year



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Homelessness is a reality for a large segment of the overall population, in spite of a booming economy, or perhaps because of it. The percentage of poor people likely to be homeless in a year is especially high in part because of the persistence of poverty and the rising costs of housing.

National Context of Annual Projections

	Annual Projections from October 1996 Average Week Estimates	Annual Projections from February 1996 Average Week Estimates
U.S. population	.9 percent	1.3 percent
U.S. population in poverty	6.3 percent	9.6 percent
U.S. children in poverty	6.2 percent	9.3 percent

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Homeless services increased after passage of the 1987 McKinney Act, which funded many types of homeless assistance programs. The capacity of transitional and permanent housing programs in 1996 was equal to the capacity of emergency shelters in 1988.

Changes in Expected Use of Homeless Services on an Average Day (provider estimates)

Shelter/Housing Beds	Winter 1988	February 1996
National Total	275,000*	607,000
Emergency Shelters		239,600
Transitional Housing		160,200
Permanent Housing		114,000
Voucher Distribution		67,000
Voucher Acceptance		26,900
Meals		
National Total		569,100
Soup Kitchens		522,300
Mobile Food Programs		46,800
	March 1987	
Big/Central Cities Total	97,000	382,100
Soup Kitchens		352,600
Mobile Food Programs		29,500

*U.S. HUD 1988 data on capacity

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The homeless service network now offers more than housing and meal services, and serves other people in addition to the homeless, such as the formerly homeless or those who have never been homeless.

Expected Use of Other Homeless Services on an Average Day in February 1996 (provider estimates*)

	Health	141,000	Other	706,500
Physical Health	64,000		Outreach	244,800
Mental Health	30,300		Drop-in Center	104,000
Alcohol or Drug	23,900		Fin./Hsg. Asst.	252,800
HIV/AIDS	22,800		Other	104,900

*Data available only in 1996

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This publication and a related press release is available on the Urban Institute's Web site at www.urban.org, or by calling the Urban Institute's Office of Public Affairs at (202) 261-5709.

"The growth of the homeless assistance network can be considered a success story from the point of view of the homeless people who are now receiving services. But housing costs are on the rise in metropolitan areas, while extreme poverty and other vulnerabilities are facts of life for millions of people, homeless and otherwise. Preventing homelessness in a booming economy is an ongoing challenge."

— Martha R. Burt