

Learning About Homelessness Using Linked Survey and Administrative Data

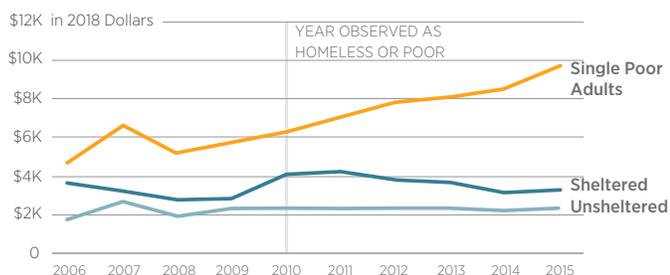
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Among a host of key findings, this work reveals that only about 9 percent of sheltered homeless adults moved in the past year to a new state, well below levels suggested by conventional rhetoric.

People experiencing homelessness are among the most deprived individuals in the United States, yet they are neglected in official poverty statistics and the extreme poverty literature and largely omitted from household surveys. Those wishing to learn about the economic circumstances of this population must turn to a handful of studies that are either localized, outdated, self-reported, or some combination of the three.

In this unprecedented project, the authors draw on underused data sources and employ novel methods to address these shortcomings to assess the permanence or transience of low material well-being among those who experience homelessness, the coverage of the safety net, and the implications of the current omission of this population from official statistics. Among other findings, the authors reveal the following:

Figure 1 • Median Pretax Income & In-Kind Transfers of Homeless and Poor Adults (Ages 18-64 in 2010)



Notes: Sheltered and unsheltered homeless groups are identified in the 2010 Decennial Census, and the single poor adult group is drawn from the 2010 ACS. Unsheltered group includes individuals enumerated at soup kitchens and regularly scheduled mobile food vans. Pretax income and in-kind transfers are calculated as in Tables 11-13. Dollars are expressed as C-CPI-U adjusted 2018 dollars. For more information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, non-sampling error, and definitions in the ACS, visit www.census.gov/acs. All results were approved for release by the Census Bureau, authorization numbers CBDRB-FY20-ERD002-007 and CBDRB-FY21-045.

Sources: 2010 Decennial Census, U.S. Census Bureau 2010 American Community Survey 1-year data, 2019 Numident, 2003-2016 IRS 1040 Datasets, 2006-2016 W2 Datasets, 2006-2016 IRS 1099R Datasets, 2004-2016 HUD PIC & TRACS, 2007-2014 Administrative VA Dataset, 2006-2014 Medicare Datasets, 2007-2015 Medicaid dataset, SNAP datasets for Illinois (2009-2016), Indiana (2004-2016), New York (2007-2016), New Jersey (2007-2016), and Tennessee (2004-2016).

- Nationally, only a small share of sheltered homeless adults in 2011-2018, about 9.1 percent, changed states in the year before their interview. While this is higher than one-year interstate mobility for the housed population, it is still lower than one might expect given the rhetoric on this subject. Further, longer-term measures of mobility since birth indicate only small differences between the homeless and comparison groups, suggesting that the link between mobility and homelessness is not as strong as suggested in public discourse.
- There are much higher rates of physical limitations relative to the housed population and moderately higher or similar rates of physical limitations relative to the poor comparison group.
- There is a stark disparity in the share reporting a cognitive limitation. Nearly one-quarter of the sheltered homeless ages 18-64 reports difficulty remembering or making decisions, a rate that is approximately twice that of the poor comparison group and 5.5 times that of the housed population in this age range. Cognitive limitations appear to be a significant factor distinguishing the sheltered homeless from the rest of the poor.

- Homelessness appears to be a symptom of long-term low material well-being. In other words, people experiencing homelessness appear to be having not just a year of deprivation and challenge, but a decade (at least).
- About 53 percent of the sheltered homeless had formal labor market earnings in the year they were observed as homeless, and the authors' find that 40.4 percent of the unsheltered population had at least some formal employment in the year they were observed as homeless. This finding contrasts with stereotypes of people experiencing homelessness as too lazy to work or incapable of doing so.
- Most people experiencing homelessness are reached by some form of social safety net program, primarily SNAP and Medicaid, with at least 88 percent of the sheltered and 78 percent of the unsheltered receiving at least one benefit.
- Finally, there is a higher rate of receipt for nearly all benefits among the sheltered relative to the unsheltered homeless. Among other explanations, the authors suggest the influence of family structure, as many safety net programs are more readily available to families (who are more likely to be in shelters) than single adults.

This project is ongoing, as the authors plan to continue their examination of their novel data sources to explore several other topics related to homelessness, including transitions in and out of homelessness, migration and geographic dispersion, and mortality.