

A Preliminary Look at Boston's Homeless Population

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Introduction

Over the last several years homeless service programs throughout the City of Boston have been involved in an attempt to gather uniform information over time about the individuals and families utilizing Massachusetts' network of homeless services. This initiative, administered by Center for Social Policy, McCormack Institute, University of Massachusetts Boston, has been funded by the City of Boston and, for the past 18 months, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The purpose of these efforts is to understand the extent of homelessness in an attempt to break the cycle of poverty.

Each year the Mayor of Boston also sponsors a one-night census of the city's homeless. Volunteers from throughout the homeless service system gather together to walk the city in search of those people who are living on the streets. These volunteers not only count the number of men and women living on the streets, but also provide them with food, blankets, and other essentials, and help them to access needed services. Simultaneously, the number of people who seek refuge in the shelters is counted to determine if homelessness has increased, decreased, or remained at the same level from one year to the next.

This report includes a summary of a portion of the census findings, compares these to other homeless data collection efforts, and then goes on to describe related information about Boston's homeless families. Finally, the homeless family data is analyzed to identify trends in the characteristics of these families over time.

Homeless Individuals Served at Pine Street Inn and Long Island Shelter Emergency Programs on December 13, 1999

This year, to enhance the findings from the census count, additional information was requested from a sample of homeless persons served at the largest shelter programs in Boston. These comprise the Pine Street Men's Inn and Long Island Shelter programs, including the Long Island Shelter, Annex, and Woods Mullen. Staff from these shelter programs interviewed one of every four persons staying at these sites that night. Respondents were asked to provide basic information about themselves, including: gender, age, race, veteran status, education, and income. Volunteers from the Center for Social Policy then entered these data into a computerized record keeping system.

On the evening of December 13, 1999, these four programs housed over 1,000 persons; 244 interviews were attempted, out of which 207 were completed, for a total response rate of 85 percent. The following describes the characteristics of those housed in these Boston Emergency Shelter programs that night. The text is followed by graphs that provide additional details about the data.

- About one-third of the population was White; one-third African American; 20% Latino; and the remaining were a mix of Asian, Pacific Islander, Multiracial, Native American, and other.
- The average age of those seeking shelter at these sites on that night was 43 years old. Four percent of those surveyed were under the age of twenty-four.
- Just under two-thirds have never been married; 20% were divorced; the remainder were separated, married, or widowed.
- **Almost one of every five persons surveyed served time in the military.**
- Half had less than a high-school diploma; 39% had a high-school diploma or GED; just over 10% had some college experience.
- **Just over one-third of those seeking shelter had no source of income;** 58% had one source of income; 6% had more than one source of income. For those who reported the amount of their income, the average was \$630 per month.¹
- More than half of those surveyed reported SSI, SSDI, or Social Security as their primary income source, with an average monthly income of \$560.
- **About one-fourth of those surveyed reported income from employment.**
- Two-thirds reported having a primary disability. These disabilities include: substance abuse, medical problems, mental illness, dual diagnosis (mental illness and substance abuse), and other impairments.
- **Slightly less than two-thirds of the population reported having some type of health insurance.** The most common type of insurance was Medicaid/MassHealth.
- **Close to 60% of the Long Island population reported being homeless for two years or less,** some as little as one month. Twenty percent reported being homeless for more than five years, with half of those homeless more than ten years. This information was only collected from those seeking shelter at the three Long Island Programs.

¹ An earlier version of this report cited the average income as \$335. Since that time, we have refined the analysis and excluded those responses with inadequate detail on income.

- The majority of those seeking shelter reported living in another shelter, rented home or apartment, or the homes of relatives or friends before sleeping at their current shelter.

How Does Individual Shelter User Data Collected During the 1999 Boston Census Compare to Other Available Information on this Population?

The data presented below compare the random sample of 207 individuals surveyed at Pine Street Inn and Long Island Shelter during the 1999 City of Boston homeless census, conducted on December 13, 1999, with a sample of 7,864 individuals who utilized shelters across the Commonwealth between October 1, 1998 and September 30, 1999.² The information described below also incorporates some data collected during the 1997 survey of Boston emergency shelters³ and information on statewide racial composition. Most of the shelter user information reflects point-in-time snapshot counts of Boston residents; the only information that describes individuals over time and across the Commonwealth is from the 1998-1999 aggregate study.

Gender

- The census sample contains fewer women due to the focus on Pine Street Inn and Long Island Shelter.

Gender	1999 Boston Census	1998-99 MA Aggregate	1997 Boston Survey
Men	89%	80%	81%
Women	11%	20%	15%
Unknown	NA	NA	3%

Race

- The census sample contains significantly fewer Whites than the other shelter user information. **All of the homeless samples contain higher proportions of minorities than the 1995 Massachusetts and Boston populations.**⁴

Race	1999 Boston Census	1998-99 MA Aggregate	1997 Boston Survey	Boston Pop. 1995	MA Pop. 1995
White	37%	55%	48%	56%	86%
African American	37%	27%	36%	26%	6%
Latino	20%	13%	9%	12%	6%
Multiracial	3%	1%	NA	NA	NA
Asian	0%	0%	2%	6%	2%
Native American	1%	1%	2%		

² The Massachusetts ANCHoR data between 10/1/98 and 9/30/99 were collected from 70 homeless programs serving homeless individuals in Massachusetts. This represents 51% of the state's individual emergency shelter programs, and 64% of the homeless individuals served in shelters during that period. These data are collected in large part by interviewing people experiencing homelessness, sometimes on the street, most often in shelters or other homeless service agencies. These data do not capture information on many people that are homeless but not in the service system, such as people that are in doubled-up living situations, and those people who are homeless but do not come into contact with the service system.

³ Friedman, D.H., Hayes, M., McGah, J., Roman, R. (1997). *A Snapshot of Individuals and Families Accessing Boston's Emergency Homeless Shelters, 1997*. McCormack Institute, University of Massachusetts Boston.

⁴ Torres, A., & Chavez, L. (1998). *Latinos in Massachusetts: An Update*. Boston, MA: The Mauricio Gaston Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy, University of Massachusetts Boston.

Pacific Islander	1%	0%	NA	NA	NA
Other	1%	3%	3%	NA	NA

Age

- In comparison with both other groups, the census population contains a greater proportion of shelter residents who are over age 55. The aggregate data shows more individuals under 25 years of age. This discrepancy may be due to the fact that census counts tend to over-represent the chronically homeless who are, by nature, older.

Age	1999 Boston Census	1998-99 MA Aggregate	1997 Boston Survey
25 and under	6%	12%	5%
26-35	22%	27%	24%
36-45	36%	35%	37%
46-55	20%	19%	22%
56-65	15%	5%	10%
66-75	2%	1%	3%
76+	0%	0%	1%

Marital Status

- Marital status was similar for the 1999 and 1997 snapshots, as well as the aggregate populations.

Marital Status	1999 Boston Census	1998-99 MA Aggregate	1997 Boston Survey
Single/Never Married	64%	61%	55%
Married	4%	9%	5%
Separated	8%	9%	14%
Divorced	20%	19%	23%
Widowed	4%	2%	3%

Educational Background

- Educational background was similar for both recent populations. However, the 1997 survey showed a significantly more educated shelter population.

Education Level	1999 Boston Census	1998-99 MA Aggregate	1997 Boston Survey
Grade School	17%	15%	23%
Some High School	34%	35%	56%
High School Grad./GED	39%	40%	21%
Some College/AA	7%	8%	
BA/MA	4%	4%	

Number of Income Sources

- Number of income sources was similar for both recent populations. Number of income sources was not collected during the 1997 survey.

Number of Income Sources	1999 Boston Census	1998-99 MA Aggregate
No Income	36%	34%
One Income Source	58%	57%
More than One Income Source	6%	9%

Most Recent Prior Living Situation

- As compared to the statewide data, the census population was more likely to have owned or rented their own home or apartment immediately prior to entering shelter, and somewhat more likely to have been in another shelter or a boarding home. The difference between the proportions of participants who were in substance abuse programs may be due to over-representation of programs with post-detoxification facilities in the aggregate data and/or under-reporting during the census. In this context, it should also be noted that 37% of the census population reported a primary disability of substance abuse or dual diagnosis (mental illness and substance abuse).
- Comparing these data to that of the 1997 survey reveals that in 1997 fewer came from other shelters, more stayed with relatives and friends, and more were on the streets immediately prior to entering shelter.

Prior Living Situation	1999 Boston Census	1998-99 MA Aggregate	1997 Boston Survey
Other Shelter	38%	33%	15%
Owned/Rented Home	31%	16%	31%
Homes of Relatives/Friends	11%	15%	28%
Boarding Home	6%	1%	N/A
Other	5%	2%	4%
Hotel/Motel	3%	1%	
Jail/Prison/Detention Center	3%	2%	7%
Detox./Substance Abuse Treatment Center	2%	22%	4%
Street/Park/Car/Abandoned Bldg.	1%	3%	8%
Transitional Shelter	1%	0%	NA
Mental/Other Hospital	0%	3%	1%
Supervised Living	0%	1%	NA

Homeless Families Served at the Boston Transition to Work Program Between April 1997 and September 1999

With funding from the City of Boston, the Transition to Work (TTW) Collaborative, a group of eight family shelters, has been tracking all families served since April 1, 1997. Through a collaboration with the Center for Social Policy, information has been collected from all of the families participating in TTW. To date, over 250 families have participated in the program. Information gathered from these families thus far is described below. The text is followed by graphs that provide more detail about some of the data.

- Ninety-five percent of heads of household served were female; 5% male.
- **More than half of those served were African American; one-quarter Latino; 8% other; 7% White; and the remaining Multiracial, Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American.**
- The average age of those served by TTW was thirty. Most were between 20 and 28 years of age. Two heads of household were less than 19 years of age; and two were older than 50 years of age.
- Seventy-two percent of those served have never been married. Ten percent were married, 9% divorced, and the remaining were either separated, married, or widowed.
- The majority of the families served through the program were single parents with children. The 263 families in the sample encompassed 735 individuals.
- **Almost two-thirds had less than a high-school diploma or GED.**
- Just under half of those served reported receiving income from more than one source. Twenty families reported no income upon entrance to the program. The average monthly income for all heads of household was \$585.
- One hundred and seventy-four families reported receiving TAFDC, with an average monthly cash benefit of \$439. Fifty-seven families reported income from earnings with an average monthly wage of \$644. Twelve of the 57 employed also received TAFDC.
- Fourteen heads of household reported receiving alimony or child support, at an average of \$265 per month.
- The majority of those seeking shelter with their families had lived “doubled up” with friends and family or in rented homes or apartments before seeking TTW services.
- **Four out of every five families that exited the program moved into subsidized housing.** Thirteen percent went to market-rate units; the remainder either moved in with family or friends or went to other types of housing.

Boston Transition to Work Program Data Over Time

The data presented below describes families served by the Transition to Work (TTW) Collaborative. To date, over 250 families have been served by this City of Boston collaborative of eight family homeless shelters. Information was collected from these families between April 1, 1997 and September 30, 1999. The information described below compares the characteristics of these families over time to identify trends in basic demographics, household composition, and income. Most of the shelter user information reflects data that were collected from heads of household at intake to the shelter, at exit from the shelter, and again at six month follow-up timeframes.

Gender

- TTW primarily served women heads of household in both periods.

Gender	Participants entering prior to 9/30/1998	Participants entering after 10/1/1998
Women	95%	94%
Men	5%	6%

Race

- **TTW participants in both periods were more likely to be African Americans, and significantly less likely to be White than the general Boston population.**⁵

Race	Participants entering prior to 9/30/1998	Participants entering after 10/1/1998	Boston Pop. 1995
African American	52%	60%	26%
Latino	30%	23%	12%
White	8%	5%	56%
Other	8%	9%	NA
Multiracial	1%	0%	NA
Asian	1%	1%	6%
Native American	0%	1%	
Pacific Islander	1%	1%	NA

⁵ Torres, A. & Chavez, L. (1998). *Latinos in Massachusetts: An Update*. Boston, MA: The Mauricio Gaston Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy, University of Massachusetts Boston.

Age

- **Over time, more heads of household receiving TTW services were over the age of thirty.** Very few young parents under the age of 19 and older parents/grandparents over 50 have received program services.

Age	Participants entering prior to 9/30/1998	Participants entering after 10/1/1998
19 and under	1%	0%
20-29	60%	41%
30-39	29%	43%
40-49	9%	16%
50-59	1%	0%
Average Age	29 years	32 years

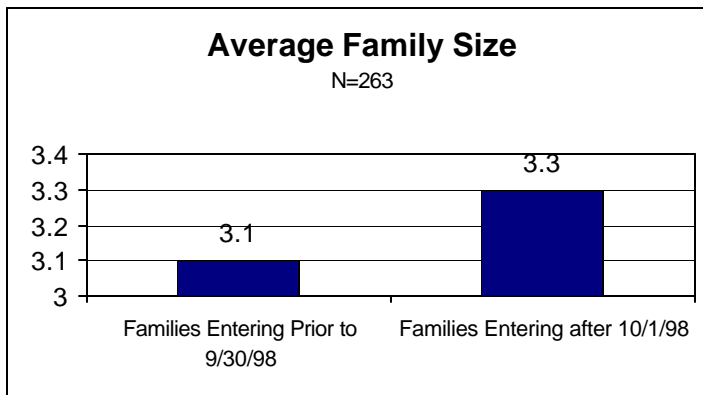
Marital Status

- Almost three of every four heads of household served in both periods were single and never married.

Marital Status	Participants entering prior to 9/30/1998	Participants entering after 10/1/1998
Single/Never Married	71%	73%
Married	9%	7%
Separated	11%	4%
Divorced	7%	12%
Widowed	1%	4%

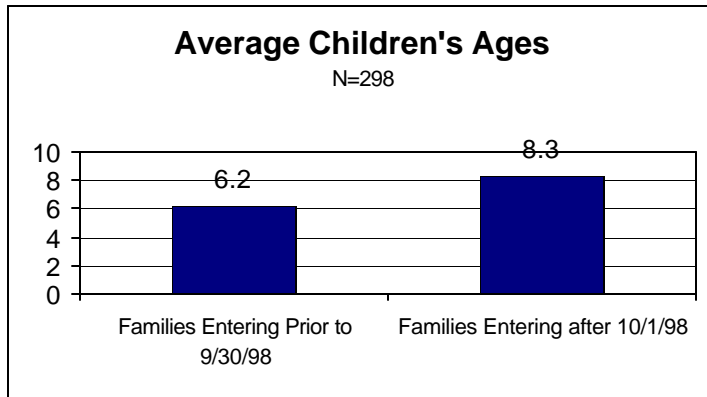
Family Size

- Families who entered the program later were somewhat larger than those who utilized the program prior to October 1998.



Children's Ages

- Children in families who entered the program later were older than those who utilized the program prior to October 1998.



Educational Background

- **Approximately two-thirds of the heads of household served by TTW in both periods did not have a high-school diploma or GED.**

Education Level	Participants entering prior to 9/30/1998	Participants entering after 10/1/1998
Grade School	13%	12%
Some High School	50%	55%
High School Grad./GED	22%	21%
Some College/AA	16%	12%
Missing Information	58%	29%

Number and Type of Income Sources

- Over time, fewer families entered shelter with no source of income. **All families entering TTW after October of 1998 had at least one source of income.**

Number of Income Sources	Participants entering prior to 9/30/1998	Participants entering after 10/1/1998	All TTW Participants 1997-99
No Income	11%	0%	8%
One Income Source	48%	33%	43%
More than One Income Source	41%	66%	49%

- The following chart identifies the source and amount of income for these TTW participants at program entry. **Proportionally, more families who entered TTW after October 1998 were working. However, the average wages for these workers were significantly lower than those of their predecessors.** The average amount received in alimony or child support also declined significantly.

Income Sources	Participants entering prior to 9/30/1998		Participants entering after 10/1/1998	
	N	\$/ month	N	\$/ month
AFDC	119	\$432	55	\$454
Food Stamps	56	\$207	47	\$220
Employment	37	\$725	20	\$502
WIC	22	\$109	6	N/A
SSI/SSDI/SS	16	\$627	16	\$556
Alimony/Child Support	11	\$313	3	\$91
Worker's Comp/ Unemployment	2	\$574	1	\$500
Total Number of Respondents	181		82	