

SESSION 1203: Spatial Demography

TITLE: No Place to Call Home: A Comparison of Homelessness in Cities and Suburbs

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### **Extended Abstract**

There are several factors that make homelessness a pressing problem in the Chicago suburbs. Poverty is growing in the suburbs as of the last census, while it declined in the city. Immigration patterns have changed so that many poor immigrants now settle outside of the city when they first move here. Social policies like welfare reform and public housing reform spread the poor into communities where they have rarely lived before. And finally, the infrastructure for ending homelessness is very underdeveloped in our suburbs, suggesting that the challenges of dealing with those teetering on the brink of homelessness will be hard to meet. The result, in our judgment, is that homelessness is destined to increase substantially in the suburbs. While estimates in this area are notoriously hard to make with any confidence, we see a scenario in the next decade where homelessness in the suburbs outstrips homelessness in the city.

While many cities, including Chicago, are making serious strides to end homelessness, it does our region little good if the problem population is merely exported outside the city limits. So what is to be done? While spreading the responsibility for managing social problems outside our most distressed urban communities makes sense on many dimensions, doing so without a sound plan for achieving some success will inevitably lead to a backlash that will affect the homeless negatively.

In this paper, we propose to analyze a demographic survey of the homeless and near-homeless in both cities and suburbs in Cook County, Illinois, paying particular attention to the respective challenges across these geographic boundaries. We will offer a basic portrait of these two communities of destitute Americans in an effort to inform both communities and service providers as they develop plans to address this new and, we believe, rising challenge.

Homelessness in individuals is known to be correlated with numerous serious problems. Homelessness is often the result of joblessness or domestic violence (Torquati 2004). Many of the homeless are mentally ill (Holter and Mowbray 2004) or suffer from addictions (Glasser and Zywiak 2004). The urban homeless also often have criminal records (Fischer 2004).

However, there is also a distinction between the long-term homeless and those struggling to keep a roof over their heads at the poverty margin. Many poor Americans report periods of homelessness, periods in which they were forced to move in with family or friends (Torquati 2004). Further, it is estimated that every year, roughly 1 million children will experience an episode of homelessness and that they and their parents will rely on the fragile net of available support services to survive (Buckner 2004). Schools, state and local government providers, hospitals, shelters and welfare agencies are all a part of the formal support structure. Churches, soup kitchens, charities and other private organizations provide the remainder of services.

Yet the homeless – both those suffering from long-term homelessness and the much larger proportion of Americans who suffer intermittent homelessness – are remarkably hard to profile. We know the correlates, but we do not yet truly understand the varied challenges facing those who suffer both extended and brief periods of homelessness, as well as those who hover at the margins of homelessness.

We have a unique opportunity to gain insight into this little-known, but profoundly troubled, population via a relatively new dataset of surveys conducted with 1,324 individuals who sought services in both urban and suburban Chicagoland in the winter and spring of 2000-2001. We propose in this paper to offer a demographic portrait of the homeless and near-homeless in Cook County, with a focus on understanding the similarities and differences in the challenges facing those who seek assistance inside the city of Chicago versus its many suburbs. We will compare the prevalence of the known correlates of homelessness across these geographic and municipal boundaries, as well as compare and contrast a more diverse sample of circumstances and challenges (such as available kin support, job experience and military service) than those typically afforded by studies of homeless populations. It is our belief that such a portrait will provide vital assistance to the efforts of both policy makers and urban and suburban service providers as they work to simultaneously treat and prevent homelessness.

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