

A Survey of Lifetime and Five-year Prevalence of
Homelessness in the Boise Area

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Different methods for counting individuals without homes often yield results that diverge dramatically, both in terms of number estimates and in terms of how the homeless population is characterized (e.g., number of females, families, etc.; see Burt, 1995; Wright & Devine, 1995). Such wildly divergent conclusions also characterize the findings obtained for Boise, Idaho. For example, in responding to perceived overestimates in Boise' 1996 Consolidated Plan – estimates of three to five thousand homeless individuals in Boise – Baltes (1997) concluded that a “realistic count of the homeless population in Boise on any given night is between 350 and 450.” Much of the disagreement relates to differences in methods. Estimates from Boise's Consolidated Plan were based on the numbers of individuals served by specific agencies (e.g., Boise Clinic, specific shelters) with adjustments for those thought to have been missed from these counts. In contrast, Baltes based his estimates on counts of individuals staying in shelters supplemented by estimates of additional homeless individuals (e.g., living on the streets) based on interviews with individuals at a soup kitchen. Also, the Consolidated Plan estimated those who had been homeless in a given year while Baltes estimated the number of individuals who were homeless on a single night.

Different methods also yield very different pictures of the nature of the homeless population. For example, Baltes concluded that homeless individuals in Boise were very transient. In 1997, only 10% had been born in Idaho; 58% had been in Boise for less than one year; 26% planned to leave Boise soon. A very different picture emerged from the Boise Blitz, a point-in-time survey of homeless individuals in Boise on September 30, 1999. Of 257 respondents, 64% had lived in Boise for one or more years; 43% had lived in Boise for more than 5 years. This is an important difference in terms of implications for policy and budget priorities. For example, transience among homeless individuals emphasizes the need for short-term emergency help (soup kitchens, temporary shelters). In contrast, if most homeless individuals in Boise are long-term residents, affordable housing for Boise's citizens should emerge as a higher priority.

Attempts to survey homeless individuals in Boise have also yielded quite different pictures of gender and family status than has emerged from other areas of the country. About 40% of the homeless population in the United States consists of family members (typically a single mother with one or two young children; see National Coalition for the Homeless, 1998). Yet, a very different picture has emerged from studies conducted in Boise. For example, Baltes (1997) reported that 91% of his sample was male; 10% were married. For the Boise Blitz, 71% of the identified homeless individuals were male; 84% had no children. Why would estimates for Boise diverge so dramatically from those from other parts of the country? Estimates for children living in poverty (about 20%) are quite similar for Idaho and the nation as a whole. Rather than concluding that Boise is unique, it is more plausible that different methods – as used in different parts of the country -- yield different pictures of the characteristics of homeless individuals. For example, the National Coalition for the Homeless

(1998) concluded that point-in-time estimates are misleading with regard to both the magnitude and nature of homelessness. Quite simply, many people are not counted because they are not in places where researchers are looking. Parents usually park cars or find temporary places to spend the night where they are unlikely to be identified and/or located. Past research on formerly homeless individuals has indicated that the most common overnight site for literally homeless individuals was vehicles (59%; Link, Phelan, Bresnahan, Stueve, Moore, & Susser 1995). Misleading estimates can yield misguided policy decisions; services most needed by single women with children, for example, are usually quite different from the services needed by single males.

The National Coalition for the Homeless (1998) suggests that **period prevalence counts** provide a better understanding of the magnitude and nature of homelessness than **point-in-time counts**. Researchers have documented that for most, homelessness is a temporary condition, resulting primarily from such factors as prolonged unemployment, sudden loss of job, inability to find affordable housing, and domestic violence. Poor families may experience “bouts” of homelessness. Because point-in-time counts take a “snapshot” of homelessness at one point in time, they will overestimate chronic homelessness, hence also overestimating the prevalence of substance abuse and other problems associated with chronic homelessness. The chronically homeless will be included in any point-in-time count while most of the intermittently homeless will be missed. Studies using period prevalence counts have revealed that many more people have experienced homelessness than had been previously thought. Research by Link et al. (Link, Susser, Stueve, Phelan, Moore, & Struening 1994; Link et al., 1995) using national telephone surveys indicated that 6.5% of individuals had experienced literal homelessness (or the streets or in shelters) at some time in the lives; 3.6% had experienced homelessness (literal or doubling up) at some time in the preceding 5 years. The Clinton Administration used estimates from these period prevalence counts – corrected for children unlikely to have their own phones – to derive estimates for the magnitude of the homelessness problem for *Priorty Home! The Federal Plan to Break the Cycle of Homelessness*.

If national figures from period prevalence counts are used to derive estimates for Boise (with a population of 160,000), we can conclude that about **10,400** have experienced literal homelessness, with **5,760** of those having experienced homelessness (literal or doubling up) in the last five years. There are a number of reasons to suggest that the figures are at least this large for Boise:

- The figures do not include corrections for children (missed in telephone surveys).
- Research with homeless families in Boise and Hartford, Connecticut, have revealed remarkable similarities (Anooshian, 1999).

- Poverty rates, including poverty rates for children, are as high for Idaho as for the rest of the country.
- Idaho implemented welfare policies in 1997 more likely to push families into poverty than other state policies (Center on Hunger and Poverty, 1998).

Of course, different methods serve different purposes. If trying to estimate the number of shelter beds needed in a specific community, point-in-time counts will be most useful. However, if trying to estimate the need for affordable permanent housing, prevalence counts are more appropriate. Beyond estimating numbers and magnitude, these surveys/estimates are perhaps most important in characterizing the nature of the individuals who experience homelessness. Prevalence estimates are more likely to include counts of the “hidden homeless” than point-in-time counts. As also discussed earlier, prevalence estimates yield more accurate information about homeless women, children, and families (more likely to be “hiding out,” less likely to be chronically homeless than single males). Yet, for families who are intermittently homeless, service needs may be as great as for the chronically homeless. For example, Anooshian (2000) summarizes the diversity and severity of barriers to academic success experienced by children who have experienced homelessness.

No single method can provide the most accurate estimates, independent of the purpose for those estimates. It is clear that multiple approaches are necessary. In Boise, there appeared to be a real danger that the need for services for families and children could be underestimated because of misleading information provided by point-in-time estimates. Hence, a preliminary attempt to gather prevalence estimates was undertaken. In addition to literal homelessness, estimates were also obtained for doubling up with friends or family. As a complement to the efforts made with the Boise Blitz, a telephone survey was developed by Boise State University, in conjunction with El Ada Community Outreach Center, to assess the frequency of past experiences with homelessness in the Boise area. Obviously, a phone survey has as many methodological problems as do point-in-time surveys. As for point-in-time estimates, there are reasons to expect phone surveys to underestimate the prevalence of homelessness. Clearly, a person who has experienced homelessness is less likely to live in a stable residence with a phone than a person who has not.

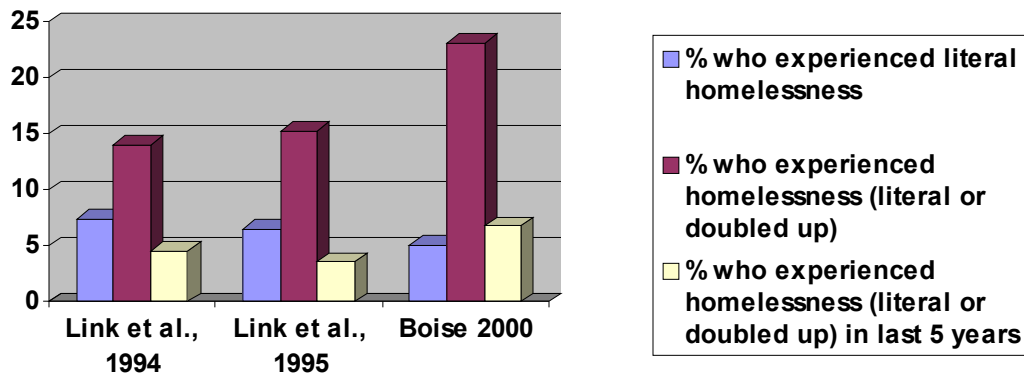
Method

The guidelines and questions for this telephone survey were based on previous research by Link et al. (1994, 1995). A random sample was drawn from telephone numbers from the US West Dex telephone directory for the Boise, Nampa, Caldwell Metro area (year 2000 edition). Numbers were collected

without names or addresses to insure anonymity for the respondents. A standardized set of questions and response sheets was provided for the interviewers. College students assisted in placing calls as part of a class project at Boise State University. Participants were given training on how to conduct the calls to insure consistency and to avoid any misunderstanding from the respondents. Calls were placed from El Ada Community Outreach Center. Throughout a four-month period, every attempt was made to contact as many numbers as possible from lists of randomly selected telephone numbers. Calls were placed at various hours and on Saturdays to try to access respondents, and each number was attempted a maximum of 8 times. In order to avoid biases that might result from biases in phone-answering behavior (e.g., females perhaps answering the phone more often than males), interviewers asked to speak to the adult (over 18 years of age) living in the household with a birthday closest to the day the call was made. This is an accepted procedure for avoiding biases introduced by speaking to only one of several people associated with the same phone number (Kish, 1965).

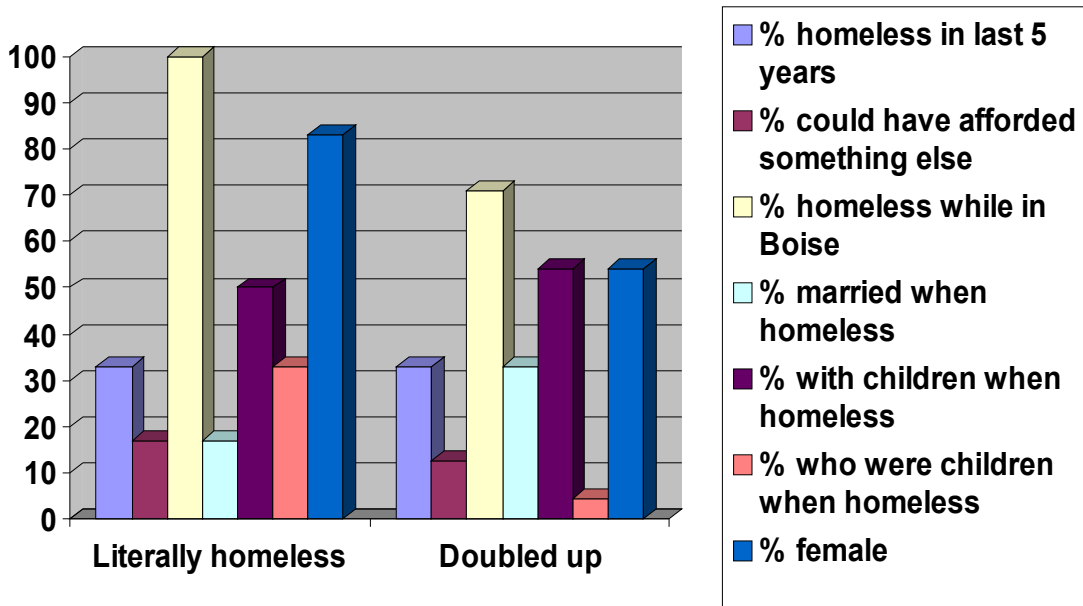
Results

A total of 256 numbers were called resulting in a total of 117 completed interviews. Sixty-eight numbers were unreachable, disconnected, or business numbers; others declined to participate. Of the 117 individuals who were interviewed, 6 responded that they had lived in “shelters, emergency housing, public or commercial buildings, vehicles, shelters to people who have been battered or abuse, abandoned buildings, makeshift housing, one’s workplace, or out in the open.” The lifetime prevalence estimate for literal homelessness, 5.1%, is somewhat smaller than that reported by Link et al. (1995; 6.5%). A total of 30 individuals reported having experienced homelessness that included doubling up or “having to stay at someone else’s home, apartment, or room because you had nowhere else to live.” Three individuals were eliminated who described temporary homelessness to achieve a specific goal not obviously tied to economic distress (e.g., doubling up during college; tents in military service). Overall, 27 of 117 interviewees or 23.1% reported an experience with homelessness (literal or doubling up). Comparisons with national estimates from previous research are summarized in the following table:



As can be seen, estimates for Boise were somewhat lower for literal homelessness, but higher for rates of overall homelessness (including doubling up) than national estimates from Link et al. (1994, 1995). The length of reported homelessness ranged from one month to 6 ½ years.

Other results suggested very different characteristics of homeless individuals than had been suggested by previous surveys in Boise. These results are summarized in the following table:



First, it should be noted that few individuals (3 of 27) responded that they could “have afforded accommodations such as a room in a boarding house, a YMCA or YWCA, or a low cost motel or hotel.” About a third of both groups (literally homeless and doubled up) had experienced homelessness in the last 5 years. Other information summarized in the above table paints a picture of homelessness that is strikingly different from that suggested by point-in-time counts. All of those in the literal homelessness group, and over 70% of the doubled-up group, had lived in Boise at the time. This suggests a population that is fairly stable rather than transient. Perhaps most striking is the information with regard to children. All of but one of the 6 individuals who had experienced literal homelessness either had children at the time of the homelessness (3) or was a child at the time (less than 18 years old; 2 total). Over half of those who reported doubling up had children at the time. Finally, most of the respondents who reported homelessness, whether literal or doubled up, were female. This picture of Boise’s homeless is strikingly different than the picture of the transient single male that often emerges from point-in-time counts.

Summary/Discussion

Overall, the results of this telephone survey indicate that reliance on point-in-time estimates (only) can provide misleading information about both the

magnitude and nature of the homelessness problem in a specific community. About 23% of the individuals interviewed in this study reported having been homeless at some time in the lifetimes (literal or doubled up); about 5% reported literal homelessness. There was a sharp contrast between the picture of homelessness that emerged from this study and the picture that has emerged from point-in-time surveys. In contrast to the preponderance of single males that emerged in earlier surveys, most of those who had experienced homelessness in this study were female and had children at the time they were homeless.

The results are perhaps most important in indicating that neither researchers nor community leaders should ever rely on a single method in characterizing and/or formulating community needs. Similar to other attempts to understand homelessness, telephone surveys are not without drawbacks (Link et al., 1994, 1995). Most obviously, people who have experienced homelessness in the past are less likely to have a permanent home with a telephone than people who have never experienced homelessness. In this context, the relatively high prevalence rates obtained in this and earlier national studies are particularly striking. Other difficulties with this survey study included barriers from modern telephone screening devices, limited availability to phones at El Ada, and reliance on volunteer help. Due to modern telephone screening devices such as Caller ID and answering machines, it can be assumed that some respondents chose not to answer the phone based on El Ada's number and name showing on their Caller ID. People often screen their calls through their answering machine as well. We chose not to leave messages because most employees working for El Ada were not trained to perform the survey in the event that a respondent called back to participate in the survey. Techniques such as advance mailers or leaving messages on answering machines explaining the survey for future callback could increase the response rate. Finally, volunteers were allowed to work their own hours; hence, much of their work could not be monitored for accuracy in following the prescribed interview protocol or in logging responses. Future telephone surveys of experiences with homelessness in the Boise could avoid some of these problems.

Despite the drawbacks of telephone surveys, they appear to capture victims of economic hardship who are missed with other types of studies. Because homelessness is often a source of shame for those who experience it, it's not surprising that most homeless individuals are among the "hidden" homeless, those unlikely to be identified or recognized as living without homes in point-in-time estimates.

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