



Rural Homeless Families

Undercounted and Underserved

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Homelessness is often thought of as a phenomenon of cities, where unsheltered individuals living on the streets and the sites that serve them, such as emergency shelters and soup kitchens, dominate media stories on the subject. Rural homelessness, by contrast, is more often unseen and, as a result, forgotten. Between 2007 and 2010, the number of homeless persons seeking shelter in rural and suburban areas increased by 53.1%, to 576,435, while the count of those living in urban locales dropped by 16.7%, to 1,016,715.

Some causes of homelessness are specific to, or more pronounced in, rural settings, such as high unemployment linked to local “boom and bust” economic cycles and lack of transportation in locations where long distances separate places of employment from affordable housing. Although homelessness indicators such as poverty, unemployment, lack of affordable housing, substance abuse, and domestic violence are common throughout the country, they are often experienced at higher rates in rural areas. For example, in 2010, 17.0% of the overall rural population and 25.1% of rural children under age 18 lived in poverty, compared with 14.5% and 20.4% in cities, respectively.

Despite their high rates of poverty and other factors that can destabilize their housing status, rural families have few shelters to turn to for assistance. Despite growing demand, in 2010 there

were 183 rural persons in poverty per shelter bed, more than twice the ratio in urban areas (87 to one; see Figure 1). According to 2010 bed-inventory data, a small proportion of family shelter beds are located in rural areas; merely 10.2% of emergency shelter, 10.7% of transitional housing, 7.9% of permanent supportive housing, and 15.6% of Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing beds were available to rural families experiencing homelessness. Some areas have no shelters; others have minimal bed capacity while serving large regions or assist only specific subpopulations (for example, survivors of domestic violence or those with substance-abuse disorders).

Collaboration, Data Collection, and Creative Solutions

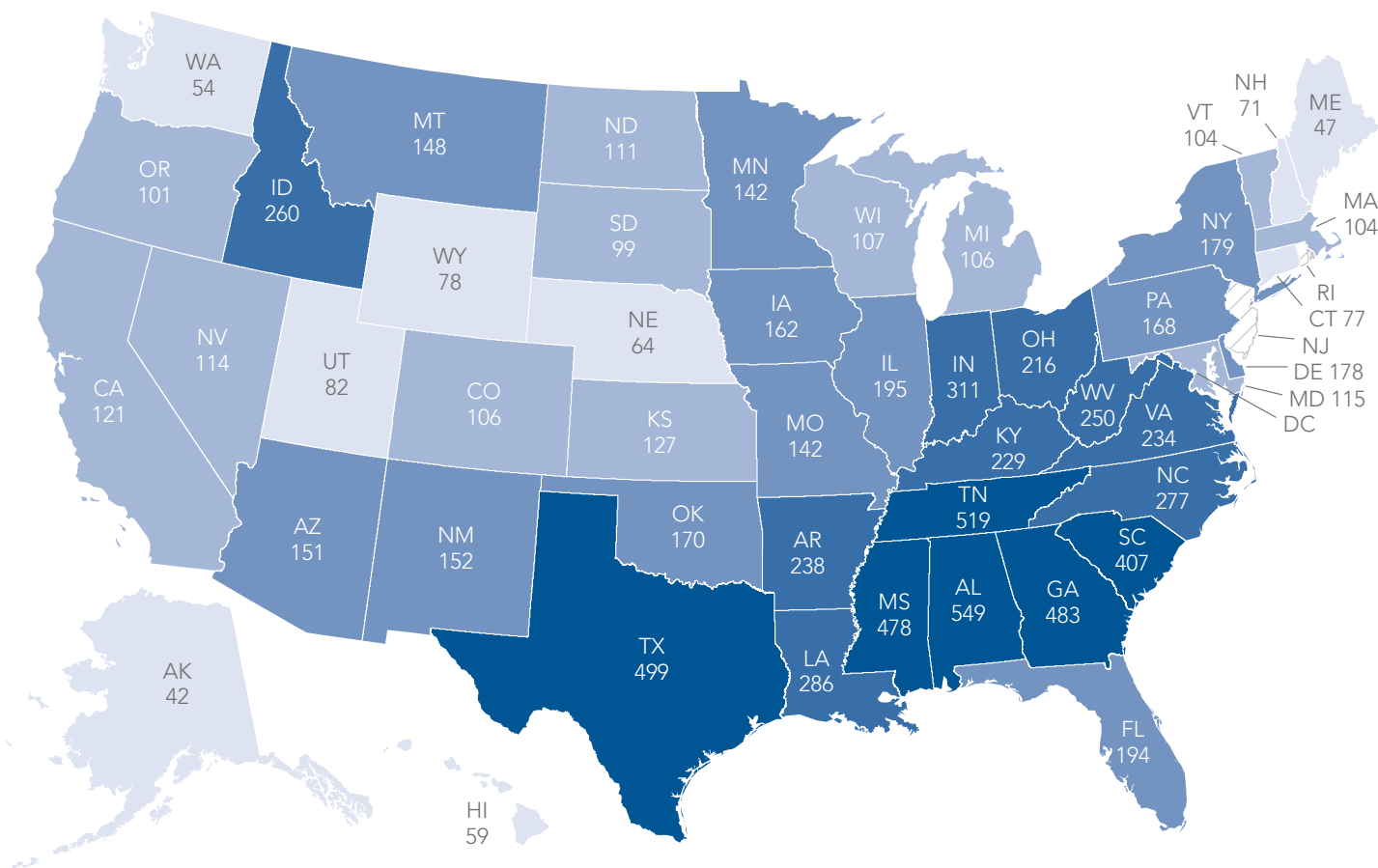
Hidden from public view, rural homeless families with children have not received sufficient attention or resources. Between 1999 and 2008, HUD awarded less than 10% of Continuum of Care program funding to rural communities. Since 2010, the competitive grant has included a selection priority for new projects in rural areas, with \$15.7 million allocated to 103 rural projects in 2011. The president’s proposed Fiscal Year 2013 budget allocated \$5 million to the Rural Housing Stability Assistance Program (RHSP), created by the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2009 to replace the defunct Rural Homeless Assistance Program. If funded, RHSP will begin to allow rural communities

on the Homefront

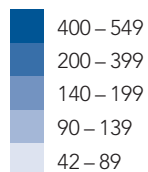
greater flexibility in serving at-risk and homeless households than was previously possible under existing federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act programs. For example, RHSP recipients can direct funds to short-term motel vouchers, prevent homelessness through repairs to current residents' dilapidated housing, develop comprehensive and

coordinated support services, or build local homelessness-response capacity. Addressing the deep-rooted poverty issues and resource deficiencies experienced by rural families is a critical step toward alleviating family homelessness. Doing so effectively, however, will require more substantial funding allocations to rural programs and services. ■

NUMBER OF RURAL PERSONS LIVING IN POVERTY PER RURAL FAMILY SHELTER BED (2010)



U.S. average 183



▨ No rural county

Note: Alaska is represented at half the scale of the other states.
Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Data are classified using Jenk's optimization.