

Definitions, Demographics, and Trends in Student and Family Homelessness

Nationally, the typical homeless family consists of a young single mother with one or two young children who live doubled up with another household. Homeless families often face a variety of unstable housing environments, with short stays in doubled-up situations and housing programs common. While many families in urban areas can access shelter, families in rural locations are more likely to live doubled up due to a dearth of available services. To address family homelessness, the issue must first be defined, but this is in itself a challenge because federal agencies currently disagree on who is considered homeless. Understanding the scope and demographics of homeless children and their families is important because data can inform policymakers in instituting effective interventions and help service providers better distinguish children in need.

The nation's schools are at the frontlines of family homelessness, with educators both identifying homeless students and connecting them with supportive services to ensure educational success. Schools provide safety and continuity in unstably housed children's lives, but the ever-increasing number of homeless students (more than 1.25 million) and limited financial resources at school districts' disposal most likely translate into unseen and unserved children.

Minority families are more likely to experience homelessness due to interrelated barriers to economic self-sufficiency that vary by racial and ethnic group, including generational poverty and institutionalized discrimination. The influence of longstanding racial and ethnic prejudice cannot be overstated and is discussed at length in the second half of this chapter. Facing the most severe barriers to housing stability, black and American Indian or Native Alaskan families are greatly overrepresented in shelter statistics compared to their share of the general population. Hispanic families are slightly underrepresented, while white and Asian households are significantly underrepresented. In comparison to the rate at which white families experience homelessness, black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Hispanic families are eight, seven, and three times more likely to live in homeless shelters, respectively.

Conflicting Federal Definitions of Homelessness

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) considers any child or youth who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence to be homeless.¹ This includes students living in emergency or transitional shelters and those sleeping in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar public or private settings that are not designated for or ordinarily used as regular sleeping accommodations. More importantly, ED's

definition includes types of unstable housing not traditionally understood by the public to be forms of homelessness. These precarious situations include living doubled up with family, friends, or others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons. In addition, students living in motels or hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations and children who are abandoned in hospitals or are awaiting placement in foster care are also defined by ED as homeless due to the temporary nature of these situations. Migratory children are considered homeless if living under any of these circumstances. Programs administered by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Labor, Justice, and Agriculture all use definitions similar to that of ED.²

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which funds most emergency housing services, uses a definition of homelessness that greatly differs from that of ED and other federal agencies.³ While HUD considers families residing in homeless shelters or in places not meant for human habitation to be unconditionally homeless, its definition of homelessness for families in doubled up or hotel/motel situations is more limited. Families living doubled up are eligible for HUD-funded emergency housing and related services only if they are losing their primary nighttime residences within 14 days. The same requirement applies to families with children residing in hotels or motels, unless the housing units are paid for by governmental or charitable organizations. Exceptions are made for families in these living arrangements if they have moved twice; did not hold a lease within the last 60 days; and have either chronic disabilities or physical or mental conditions, substance addiction, histories of domestic violence or childhood abuse, a disabled child, or two or more severe barriers to employment. These complicated differences in definitions among federal agencies are a logistical and bureaucratic challenge to providing services to the most vulnerable children and families.

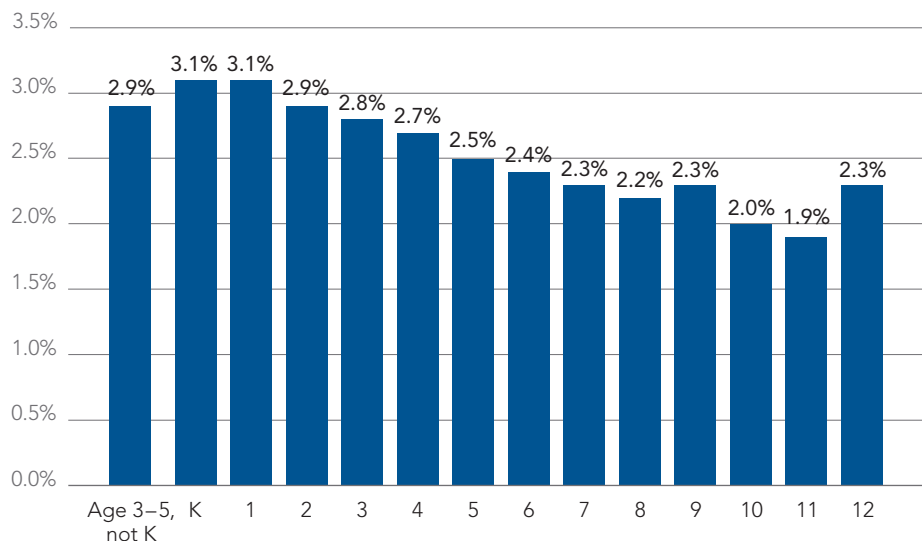
Demographics and Trends of Homeless Students

More than 1.25 million children experienced homelessness during School Year 2012–13 (SY12–13). Three-fourths (75%) of homeless students lived doubled up, 16% resided in shelters, and 6% stayed temporarily in hotels or motels. Three percent, or more than 40,000 students, lived unsheltered on the streets or in other places not fit for human habitation.⁴

Over 2.5% of all students, or one in every 39, were homeless in SY12–13. California and New York, states that accounted for more than 30% of all homeless students nationwide,

Figure 1
Percent of Students Experiencing Homelessness in School Year 2012–13

(by grade)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, *Consolidated State Performance Reports: School Year 2012–13*; U.S. Department of Education, *State Nonfiscal Public Elementary/Secondary Education Survey 2012–13 v.1a*.

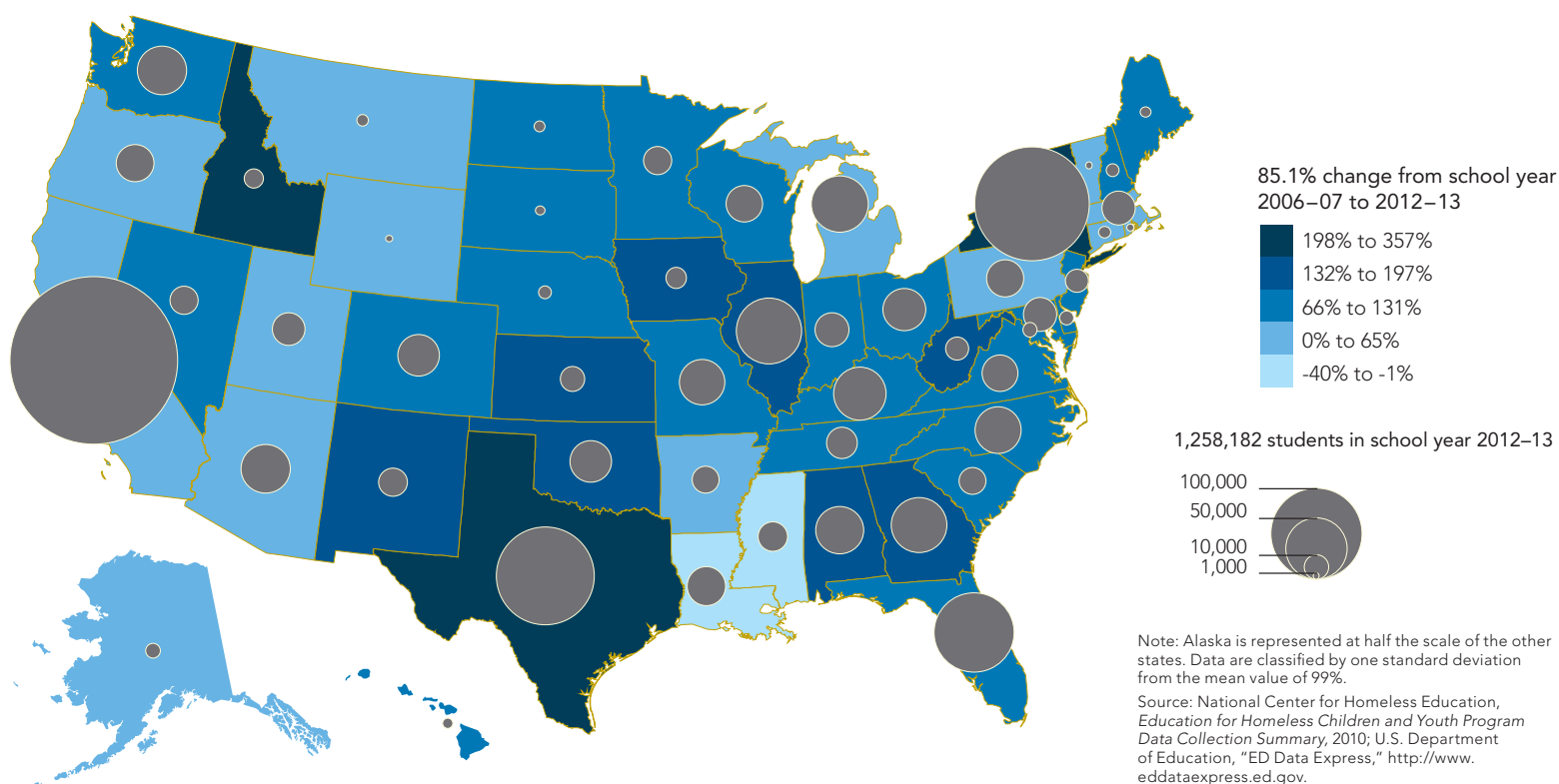
also had high rates at 4.1% and 4.9%, respectively.⁵ While city-level data are scarce, New York City had a rate (7.4%) three times the national average. Chicago’s rate (4.5%) was nearly double that of the nation; however, rates in other large urban areas, including Los Angeles (2.1%) and Dallas (1.6%), were lower than the national average.⁶

The rate of homelessness also varies across school grades. Younger students are far more likely to be homeless than older students, as limited access to child care makes families with younger children more vulnerable to homelessness.⁷ With the exception of slight increases in the 9th and 12th grades, the rate of student homelessness steadily decreases from a high of more than 3% among kindergarteners to a low of less than 2% in the 11th grade (Figure 1).⁸

In recent years, there has been an unparalleled rise in the number of homeless students. Since SY06–07, the year before the Great Recession, and SY12–13, the number of homeless students increased by over four-fifths (85%). Led by the **District of Columbia** at 357%, 28 states saw an increase in student homelessness that surpassed the national rate. Some of the states with the most homeless students—**New York** (131,600) and **Texas** (101,088)—saw the number of homeless students triple during this time period (increases of 199%

and 198%, respectively). Only two states, **Louisiana** and **Mississippi**, had decreases in the number of homeless students, in part due to children displaced by 2005’s Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In general, states in the Midwest and Great Plains experienced the highest increases, while states in New England and the West saw more modest upticks (Figure 2).⁹

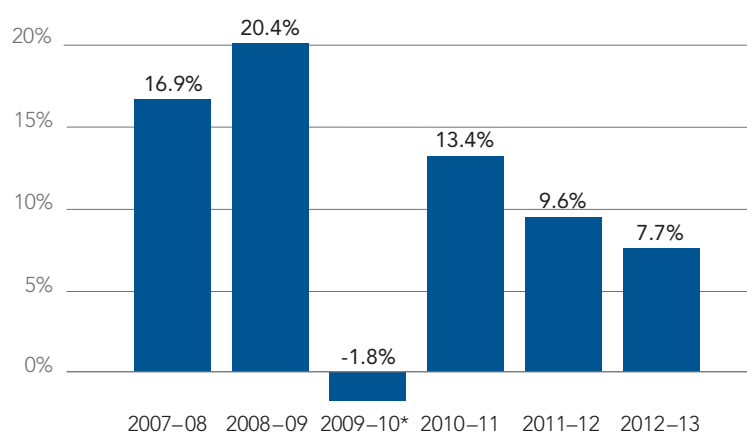
Figure 2
Number (Spring 2013) and Percent Change (Spring 2007–13) of Homeless Students



During the two school years that coincided with the economic downturn, student homelessness increased by 16.9% in SY07–08 and 20.4% in SY08–09 (Figure 3). Even after the official end of the recession (June 2009), the number of homeless students has continued to grow. At first glance, the number of homeless students appeared to have decreased slightly (-1.8%) during SY09–10; however, California underreported its numbers that year. Excluding California, the number of homeless students actually rose 11.6% that year.¹⁰

Figure 3
Percent Change in the Number of Homeless Students from Prior School Year

(by current school year)



* California underreported their numbers in SY09–10. Excluding California, the number of homeless students increased 11.6%.

Source: National Center for Homeless Education, *Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program Data Collection Summary, 2010–14*; U.S. Department of Education, “ED Data Express,” <http://www.eddataexpress.ed.gov>.

Not surprisingly, in a 2010 survey, almost two-thirds (62%) of state education departments and local school districts cited the economic downturn as the primary cause of the sharp increase in the number of homeless students reported. However, two in five (40%) educators attributed the increase to more community awareness and one-third (33%) to a greater

ability to identify students who are homeless.¹¹ In recent years, educators have heightened outreach efforts to homeless students and have been particularly successful at identifying those living doubled up, who often do not self-identify as homeless. The number of homeless students living in doubled-up situations more than doubled (122.4%) between SY06–07 and SY12–13, far outpacing the increase of students in shelters (19.0%) and those in hotels or motels (37.8% [Table 1]).¹² The State Dashboards part of the *Almanac* provides additional information on the living arrangements of homeless students in each state between SY06–07 and SY12–13.

Though the recent improvements are notable, schools still struggle with under-identifying homeless students and providing services to those in need. Many districts rely on entrance questionnaires to find out which students are homeless, but these tend to provide limited information. Once identified, there are barriers to providing homeless students with services, including student mobility, social stigma, insufficient staffing, and the varying definitions of homelessness for federal program eligibility.¹³

Federal funding is another significant factor in how many homeless students are identified and served; the number of homeless students served is directly related to the amount of available funding. Authorized through the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program is the only dedicated source of federal funding source for identifying, enrolling, and providing services to homeless students.¹⁴

Prompted by dire economic conditions and improved community awareness, homeless education liaisons working at the school level have been able to reach more students despite little change in EHCY funding (Figure 4); the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), however, presented an additional \$69.9 million in stimulus funds for EHCY disbursed over the 2009–11 federal fiscal years.¹⁵ ARRA stimulus funds provided essential financial assistance, filling significant budget gaps that existed as

Table 1
Primary Nighttime Residence

(by school year and percent change)

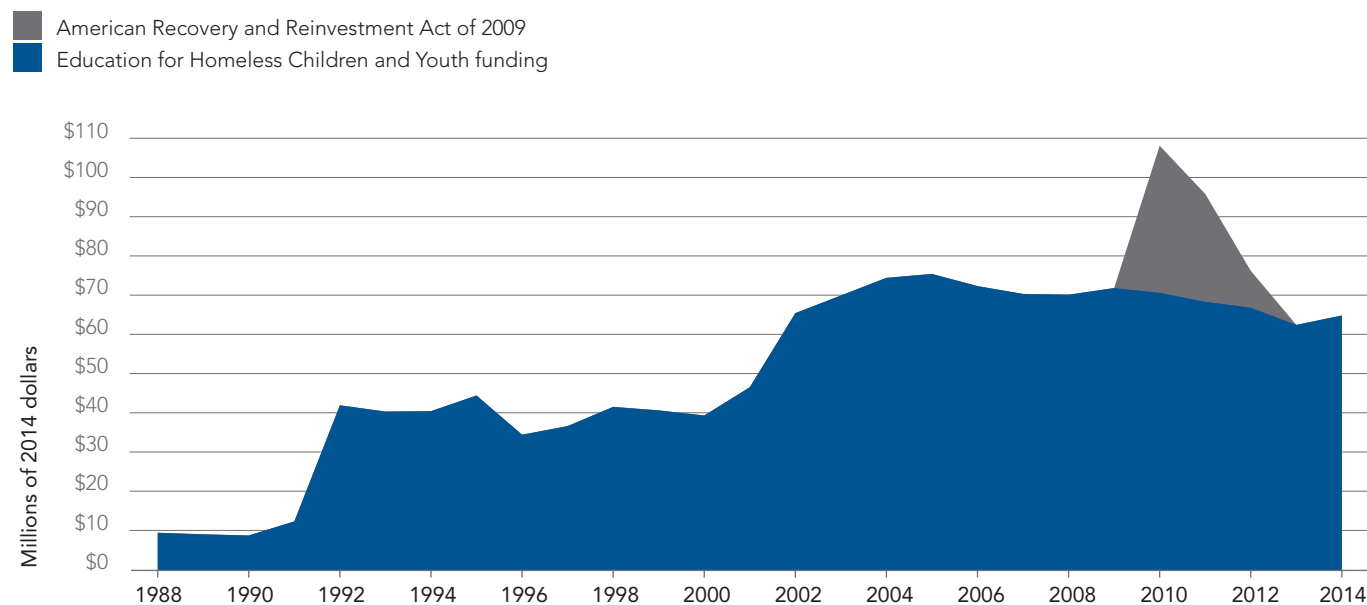
| | 2006–07 | 2007–08 | 2008–09 | 2009–10 | 2010–11 | 2011–12 | 2012–13 | Percent change spring 2007–13 |
|------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------------------------|
| Sheltered | 161,640 | 164,982 | 211,152 | 179,863 | 187,675 | 180,541 | 192,391 | 19.0% |
| Doubled up | 420,995 | 502,082 | 606,764 | 668,024 | 767,968 | 879,390 | 936,441 | 122.4% |
| Unsheltered | 54,422 | 50,445 | 39,678 | 40,701 | 51,897 | 41,575 | 41,635 | -23.5% |
| In hotels/motels | 51,117 | 56,323 | 57,579 | 47,243 | 55,388 | 64,930 | 70,458 | 37.8% |
| Total | 679,724 | 794,617 | 956,914 | 939,903 | 1,065,794 | 1,168,354 | 1,258,182 | 85.1% |

Note: Primary nighttime residence may not properly total for each school year.

Source: National Center for Homeless Education, *Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program Data Collection Summary, 2010–14*; U.S. Department of Education, “ED Data Express,” <http://www.eddataexpress.ed.gov>.

Figure 4
Education for Homeless Children and Youth Funding

(by federal fiscal year in 2014 dollars)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, *Education Department Budget History State Tables: FY 1980–FY 2014 President’s Budget, 2014*; U.S. Department of Education, *Fiscal Years 2013–15 State Tables for the U.S. Department of Education*; U.S. Department of Education, *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009—Spending Reports by State as of September 30, 2010–11*; U.S. Department of Education Office of Inspector General, *School District’s Use of Recovery Act and Education Jobs Funds, September 2012*.

a result of the economic downturn and doubled the number of school districts receiving support through the program. Nevertheless, only one in five school districts received financial assistance through either the ARRA or EHCY allocations.¹⁶ For the first time in FY14, federal Title I, Part A funding to improve academic achievement of low-income students can be used to support homeless school liaisons and provide transportation to homeless students schools of origin, which help ease local fiscal shortfalls of EHCY allocations.¹⁷

Number and Characteristics of Homeless Families

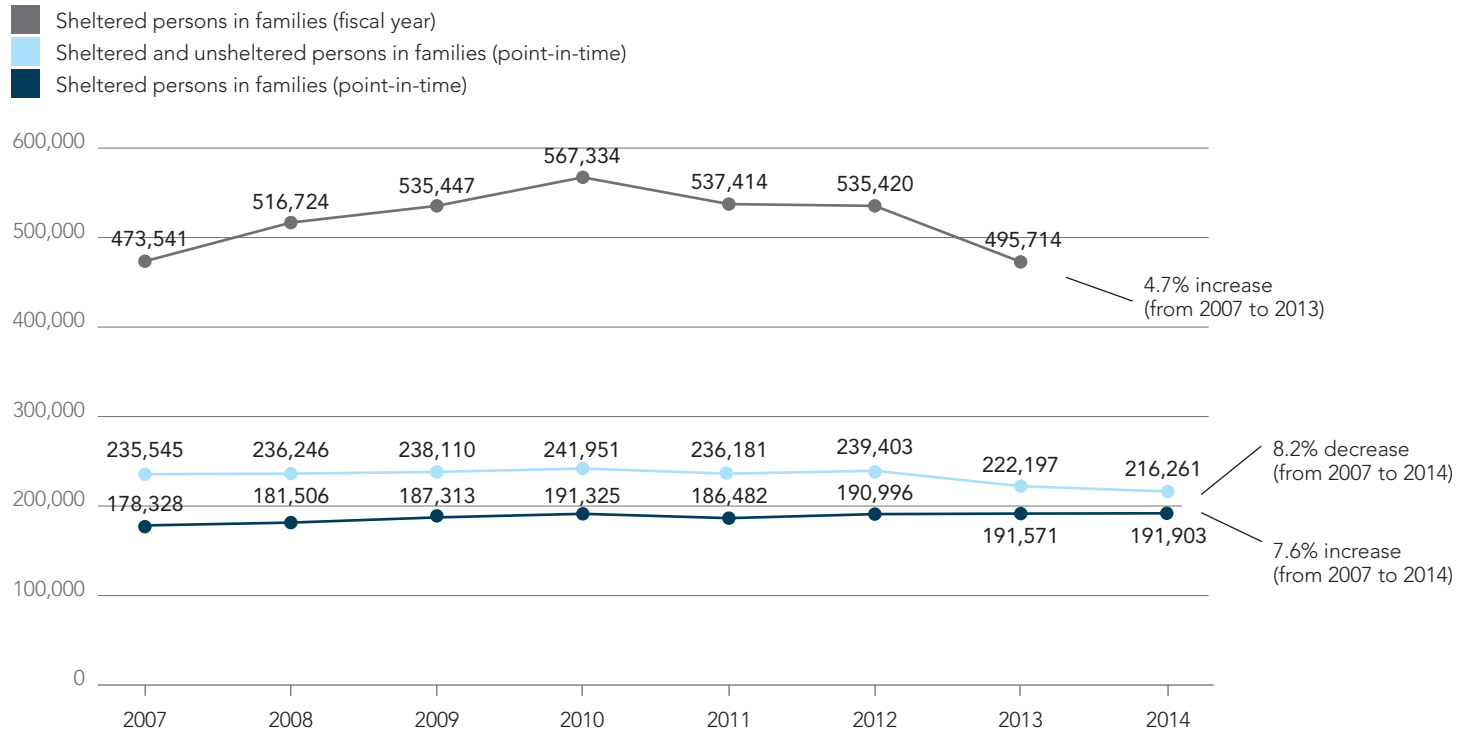
An estimated 495,714 parents and children entered emergency shelter or transitional housing over the course of 2013, a 4.7% increase since 2007, before the recent economic downturn began.¹⁸ Although tabulations vary across studies, an estimated 2.1 million family members lived in doubled-up situations in 2008, four times more than those who stayed in homeless shelters over the course of that same year.¹⁹ At least 24,000 family members lived unsheltered on a single day in January 2014; however, counts of families living on the streets, under bridges, or in cars, abandoned buildings, wooded areas, camp sites, and other places not meant for human habitation are likely underestimates.²⁰ The total num-

ber of homeless families who stayed temporarily in hotels or motels is unknown.

HUD conducts two separate counts of the number of family members who access shelter, both of which should be interpreted with caution when evaluating trends in family homelessness. For the first count, communities across the country conduct one-day “point-in-time” counts of the number of sheltered (conducted annually) and unsheltered (required every other year) persons during the last ten days in January. While it is relatively straightforward to count those living in shelter, the process of determining the number of unsheltered persons has several limitations, which can lead to erroneous counts and underestimates. These difficulties range from the unknown locations at which unsheltered families may congregate to inclement winter weather that inhibits volunteers’ ability to identify and count persons living in places not meant for human habitation. Local changes in methodology pose yet another issue. Therefore, separating the number of sheltered and unsheltered family members produces different trends. Although the total number of family members dropped 8.2% between 2007 and 2014, the decline was entirely due to half (57.4%) as many unsheltered family members counted in 2014 than in 2007. The number of

Figure 5
Number of Persons in Homeless Families

(by reporting period and shelter type)



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Annual Homeless Assessment Reports to Congress*, 2010–14.

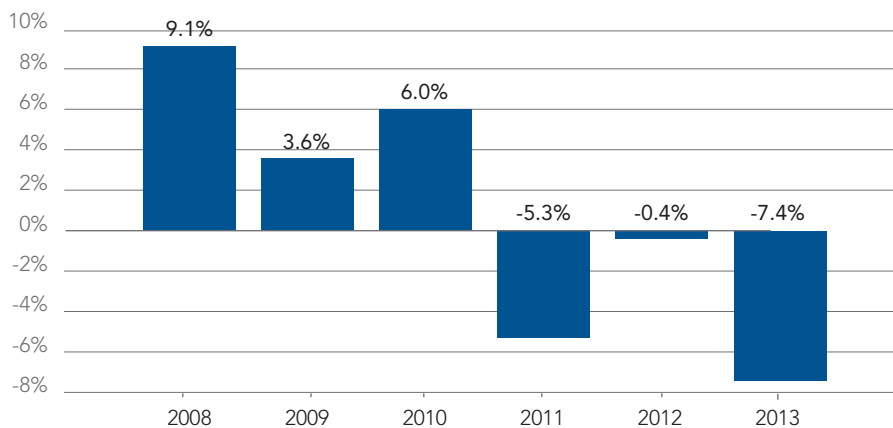
homeless parents and children in shelter actually increased 7.6% during this time period (Figure 5).²¹

For the second count, HUD estimates the total number of homeless family members who access shelter over the course of one fiscal year based on a sample of communities. By collecting data annually rather than on a single day, the chance of random fluctuations due to changes in the number of shel-

ter beds, the length of stay in shelter, and the occupancy rate, among other factors, is reduced (although not eliminated). Between 2007 and 2013, the number of family members who used shelter over the course of one year increased by 4.7% (Figure 5). Year over year changes during this time period indicate that more families accessed shelter during the recession and then fewer did as the economy began recovering, in part due to fewer available shelter beds (Figure 6).²²

Figure 6
Percent Change in the Number of Sheltered Family Members from Prior Fiscal Year

(by current fiscal year)



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Annual Homeless Assessment Reports to Congress*, 2009–13.

This data is also limited in its applicability since HUD restricts its definition of homelessness to only those families living in shelter or unsheltered situations. As discussed in the previous section, data collected by ED also includes students living doubled up with another household or in hotels and motels, which accounted for more than four-fifths (81.1%) of all students in SY12–13.

As a result of these conflicting definitions, little is known regarding the demographics of homeless families living doubled up, in hotels or motels, or on the streets, but it can be assumed that they closely resemble those of families who stay in homeless shelters. In fact, only 20% of families in 2012 entered shelter directly from their own rented or owned housing; nearly half (40%) previously lived doubled up. About one-third (31%) came from other shelter facilities or unsheltered locations, while 7% lived in other settings, including hotels and motels, the night before entering shelter. Only 2% of families were discharged into homeless situations directly from institutional settings, such as psychiatric and correctional facilities and hospitals.²³

On a single night in 2014, 7.0% of persons in families were chronically homeless, meaning that the head of household has a disability, and the family has been either homeless for over one year or on four occasions within the three previous years. Nationally, 15.2% of all chronically homeless people were persons in families, though this rate varied widely by state.²⁴ The federal Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2009 expanded the definition of “chronically homeless” to include families with children.²⁵ Because this family population has only recently been singled out for observation, little research exists on their characteristics and needs. What is apparent is families’ extreme vulnerability due to co-occurring disabilities (serious mental illness, substance abuse, or developmental or physical impairment) and long-term homelessness conditions. Studies on family supportive housing programs—whose clients share characteristics with chronically homeless individuals—reveal mothers who are typically older and better educated (but with similarly poor employment patterns), with longer histories of homelessness and more disabilities than those served by the emergency shelter system.²⁶

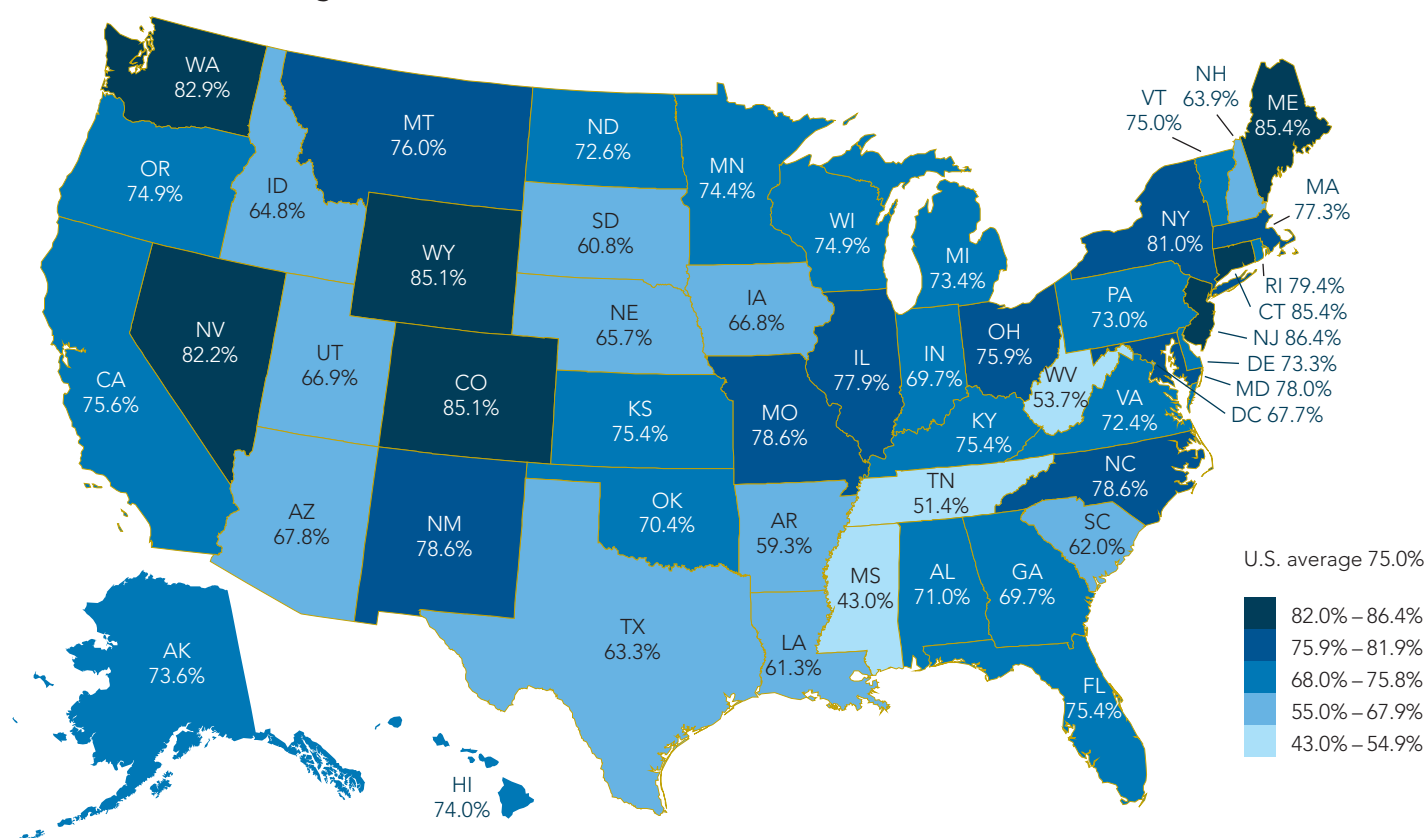
The demographics of homeless parents and their children living in shelter differ from those of stably housed poor families and those in the general population. Parents in homeless families are overwhelmingly more likely to be female (78%), compared with housed poor families (64%) and families overall (55%). Homeless parents also tend to be younger than parents in non-homeless poor families or parents overall, although the national median or average age of homeless parents is unknown.²⁷

Homeless families in shelter have smaller household sizes than other U.S. families. About one-quarter (24%) of homeless families consist of a single parent with one child, a rate six times higher than families in the general population (4%). Homeless families are also less likely to consist of five or more people (25% versus 41%). Given the prevalence of younger mothers and smaller families within the homeless population, homeless children are more likely to be younger. Half (52%) of homeless children living in shelters are preschool-aged (under 6), while one-third (35%) are elementary school-aged (6 to 12), and 14% are middle- and high school-aged (13 to 17).²⁸

Homelessness is often considered to be an urban issue, where both unsheltered individuals living on the streets and the facilities that serve them, such as emergency shelters and soup kitchens, dominate stories about homelessness in the media and public perception. Sheltered urban families outnumber suburban and rural families two to one and homeless families are more likely to live in principal cities (63%), compared with poor families (37%) and families in the general population (23%). Rural homelessness, by contrast, is more often unseen and, as a result, unaddressed. Between 2007 and 2012, the number of parents and children living in rural and suburban areas increased by more than half (54%), while those in urban areas decreased by 2%.²⁹ This trend is due in part to the movement of more low-income households from urban to suburban areas over the past decade.³⁰ 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, lack of transportation in locations where long distances separate places of employment and affordable housing, and limited access to a variety of other services, including health care. Although factors such as poverty, unemployment, lack of affordable housing, substance use, and domestic violence are common throughout the country, they are often experienced at higher rates in rural areas.³¹ With the majority of services centered in urban and suburban locales, families experiencing rural homelessness are more likely to live doubled up. In fact, only 6% of homeless persons access shelter in rural locations, despite those areas having higher poverty rates than cities.³²

Regardless of their geographic locale, parents and children enduring homelessness tend to face frequent housing instability. Less than one-quarter (22%) of families who enter shelter lived in their prior residence for one year or more; 34% had stable housing for less than one month, with another 16% of families relocating between one and three months prior to shelter entry. Many families living in emergency shelter, where the average length of stay is 65 days, move into transitional housing and stay for an average of six additional months (178 days).³³ Some families are unable to attain self-sufficiency after leaving shelter and return after they exit.³⁴

Figure 7
Percent of Adults Exiting SHP or S+C Without Jobs, 2011



Note: The Supportive Housing Program (SHP) funds transitional housing, permanent housing, safe havens, innovative supportive housing, supportive services only, and homeless management information systems. Shelter Plus Care (S+C) includes tenant-, sponsor-, and project-based rental assistance and single room occupancy dwellings. Beginning in 2012, SHP, S+C, and the Section 8 Moderate Rehabilitation grants were consolidated into the Continuum of Care Program. Alaska is represented at half the scale of the other states. Data are classified using Jenk's optimization.

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, HUD's 2011 Exhibit 1 Continuum of Care (CoC) Application.

In the pursuit of affordable housing, earning and saving money is a struggle for homeless parents. Only one-quarter (25%) of all adults (including those who have children and those who do not) who exit shelter, supportive housing, or rental-assistance programs earn income from employment (Figure 7).³⁵ Even when parents work, their jobs typically do not pay a living wage or provide health insurance or other benefits.

Studies estimate that between 39% and 65% of homeless mothers did not graduate high school or earn an equivalency degree, compared with 16% of all single mothers and 26% of poor housed mothers.³⁶ Differences also exist between at-risk families and those who experience homelessness; one report found that 48% of those at risk of housing instability did not complete high school, compared with 60% of homeless parents.³⁷ Low educational attainment often inhibits a parent's ability to obtain employment that is sufficient to support a family and maintain stable housing. A higher level of education is strongly correlated with increased annual earnings; workers with bachelor's degrees earn nearly twice as much as those with high school diplomas over the course of 40 years. Lack of education is often intergenerational, as children of parents without high school diplomas are more likely to drop out of school themselves.³⁸

The Struggles of Homeless Minority Families

The stark reality is that racial and ethnic minority families

are overrepresented in U.S. homelessness and poverty statistics. Factors such as institutionalized discrimination and generational poverty result in disparities in access to quality housing, employment, and education. These social exclusions leave minorities more likely to have smaller financial buffers to fall back on in emergency situations; to reside in poor, segregated, and unsafe neighborhoods that lack community resources; and to experience homelessness. Black as well as American Indian and Native Alaskan families are greatly overrepresented in sheltered homeless populations, facing the most severe barriers to housing stability. Hispanic families are slightly underrepresented, while white and Asian households are severely underrepresented compared with their share of the general population.³⁹

Black Homeless Families

In 2012, one-third (33.2%) of black families with children lived in poverty, close to three times the rate of white families (12.3% [Figure 8]). Black families also experience homelessness at much higher rates. In 2012, one of every 134 black family members stayed in homeless shelters, a rate eight times higher than that for persons in white families (one in 1,115 [Figure 9]).⁴⁰

Understanding why blacks are so overrepresented in homelessness statistics requires an examination of the longstanding and interrelated social and structural issues facing the black community. Throughout U.S. history, housing discrimination

based on race has been ever-present, both in the form of official government policies and societal practice. Federal policies that reduced the stock of affordable housing through urban renewal projects, beginning in 1949, displaced a disproportionate number of poor blacks concentrated in impoverished areas of cities, relocating them to other substandard neighborhoods. Residential segregation, which affects black households to a greater extent than other minorities, perpetuates poverty patterns by isolating blacks in areas that lack employment opportunities and services and have higher crime and poverty rates.⁴¹ Blacks are also overrepresented in the criminal justice system, which increases the risks of homelessness and developmental delays among their children.⁴²

Lower educational attainment among blacks serves as a barrier to employment and especially to well-compensated jobs. Blacks earn bachelor's degrees at nearly half the rate of whites (18.7%, compared with 32.5%).⁴³ Employment disparities rooted in subtle forms of discrimination persist even with academic advancement.⁴⁴ In 2012, blacks with associate degrees experienced a higher unemployment rate than whites with high school diplomas (10.2% and 7.5%, respectively). Furthermore, a black employee with a bachelor's degree or higher was paid nearly one-fifth (17.5%) less on average in weekly full-time salary (\$972) in 2012 than a white worker (\$1,178) with the same level of education.⁴⁵

Inequality in earnings impedes families' attempts to exit poverty and contributes strongly to the relative lack of wealth accumulated by black households. In 2009, the median wealth of white households was 20 times that of blacks' nationwide (\$113,149 versus \$5,677).⁴⁶ Financial assets serve as a crucial buffer in times of economic hardship, covering unexpected health expenses and preventing loss of housing during periods of unemployment. Access to additional funds improves living conditions during working years and retirement. Intergenerational wealth transfers can enhance the economic circumstances of younger relatives, for example through investments in children's education, inheritances, and other monetary gifts.⁴⁷

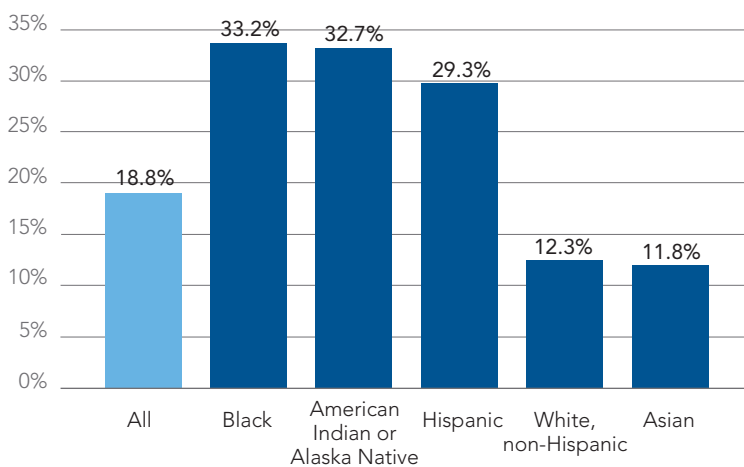
American Indian and Alaska Native Homeless Families

In 2012, one-third (32.7%) of American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN) families lived in poverty, a rate nearly three times that of white families (12.3% [Figure 8]).⁴⁸ The poverty rate for the more than one-fifth (21.3%) of families with children living on designated federal and state-recognized American Indian reservations was even higher, at 39.7%.⁴⁹ In 2012, AIAN families were the second most likely to experience homelessness, with one in 149 AIAN family members staying in homeless shelters (Figure 9).⁵⁰

Historical mistreatment, decades of neglect from federal funding sources, policies of social marginalization, and housing discrimination surpassing that of other minorities have resulted in a large share of AIAN families—particularly those residing on reservations and similar lands—experiencing entrenched poverty and living conditions far below adequate-quality thresholds.⁵¹ Overcrowded and substandard housing conditions and insufficient access to health care and social services have led American Indian households to suffer poorer health and lower life expectancy than other minorities.⁵² Many AIAN communities also lack economic opportunities and sources of credit and see low levels of private investment.⁵³

Figure 8
Percent of Families with Children in Poverty, 2012

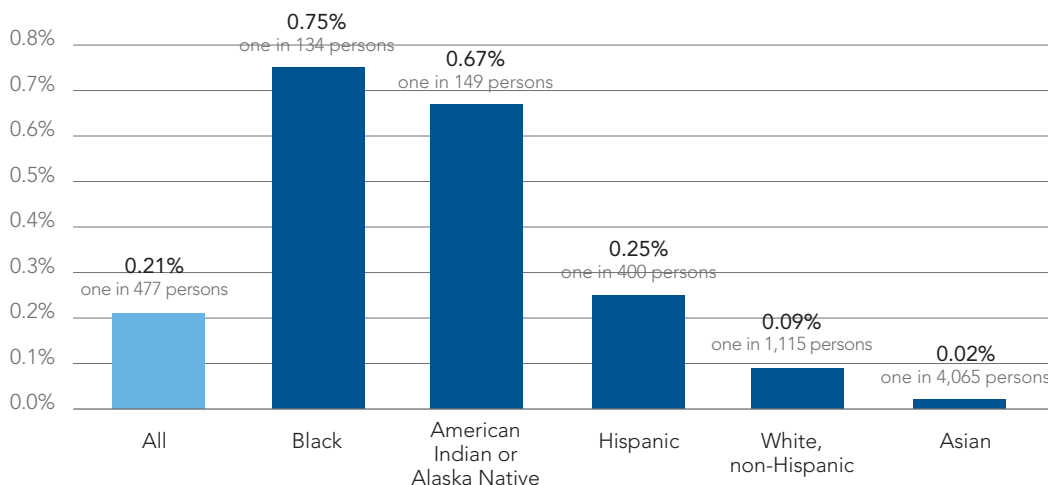
(by race or ethnicity)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey 1-year Estimates.

Figure 9
Percent of Persons in Families who Experienced Homelessness, 2012

(by race or ethnicity)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey 1-year Estimates; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, The 2012 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress.

The subpar quality of educational services and facilities and a scarcity of early childhood educational programs on reservations, as well as a lack of culturally appropriate curricula and supports for AIAN students attending public schools, contribute strongly to below-average academic achievement and low rates of high school completion.⁵⁴ Among American Indians and Alaska Natives, over one-fifth (21.2%) have less than a high school diploma, more than twice the rate (8.5%) for whites (Figure 10).⁵⁵ A 2012 Minnesota study comparing the experiences of homeless persons in different regions found that the lack of high school diplomas was more common among homeless American Indians living on Minnesota reservations (32.0%) than among the general homeless population in the state (24%).⁵⁶ In 2012, the average unemployment rate for AIAN individuals was 15.9%, compared with the national average of 9.4%. Unemployment on reservations is typically much higher due to limited job opportunities.⁵⁷

Hispanic Homeless Families

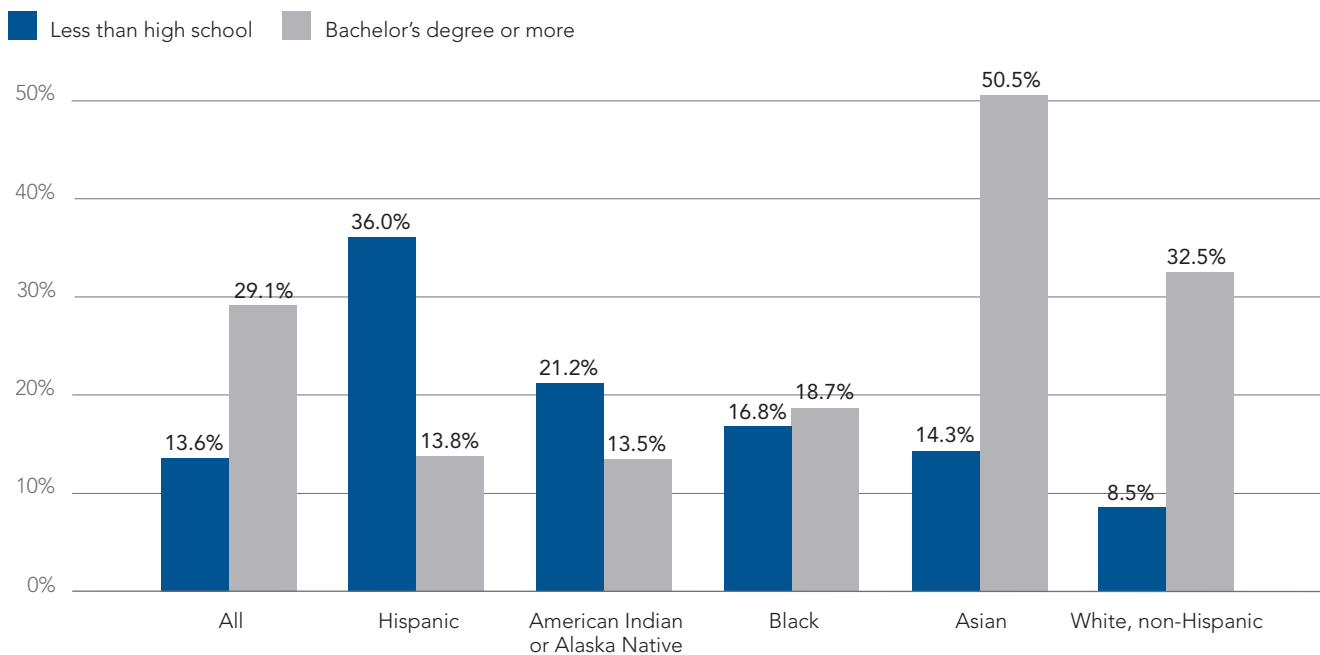
In 2012, over one-quarter (29.3%) of Hispanic families with children lived in poverty, more than twice the rate of white families (12.3% [Figure 8]). Despite the similarities in poverty rates between Hispanics and blacks, fewer Hispanic family members (one in 400 compared to one in 134) stayed in homeless shelters in 2012 (Figure 9).⁵⁸

Such homelessness statistics may represent an undercount due to a range of factors unique to Hispanic homeless families. Language barriers, fear of deportation of an undocumented family member, and migratory labor patterns result in lower service utilization and subsequent underrepresentation in homelessness statistics. Hispanic families may rely on close-knit, kinship-based social networks over agency-

run social services, reducing the rate of literally homeless Hispanics but increasing the number of doubled-up families potentially living disconnected from services in overcrowded and substandard conditions. This preference may further reduce access to employment and other opportunities by decreasing the frequency of interactions and closeness of relationships with a wider range of non-related individuals, such as coworkers and friends. Some studies suggest that literally homeless Hispanics are also more likely to stay in atypical unsheltered locations, for example in abandoned buildings, thus frequently “hidden” from and overlooked by homelessness surveyors.⁵⁹

Issues surrounding immigration status limit low-income Hispanic families’ access to benefit programs that could keep them from experiencing homelessness. Welfare reform legislation passed in 1996 resulted in much lower public benefit participation rates among legal non-citizen households; even qualified immigrant families living in poverty are prevented from receiving aid due to complex application rules, confusion over eligibility criteria, limited English skills among applicants, and fear that participation may disqualify family members from obtaining permanent residency status (“green cards”). In “mixed-status” households, fear of deportation keeps undocumented parents from applying for assistance for their qualifying U.S.-born children.⁶⁰ Harsh legislative measures taken in recent years by states seeking to address unlawful immigration initially heightened deportation concerns among Hispanics, but subsequent legal challenges were largely successful at blocking most provisions.⁶¹ Instead, federal policies focused on aggressively increasing the number of deportations have become the major focus, resulting in fear of racial profiling and fewer Hispanics reporting crimes to local law enforcement.⁶²

Figure 10
Selected Educational Attainment for the Population 25 Years or Older, 2012
 (by race or ethnicity)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey 1-year Estimates.

Several factors place many Hispanic families and individuals in a financially unstable position. Over one-third (36.0%) of Hispanics have less than a high school degree, a rate substantially higher than for blacks or whites (Figure 10).⁶³ In 2012, a Hispanic full-time employee with a bachelor's degree or higher earned close to one-fifth (17.9%) less in weekly full-time salary (\$967) than a white worker (\$1,178) with the same level of education.⁶⁴ In 2009, when facing economic hardship, Hispanic households had 18 times less accumulated wealth to fall back on than whites (\$6,325, compared with \$113,149). This amount decreased by two-thirds (65.5%) between 2005 and 2009, primarily due to the housing-market crash, which strongly affected states with large Hispanic populations. White households experienced a significantly lower 15.6% decline during the same time period.⁶⁵

Differences also exist within the broad “Hispanic” category, which disguises homelessness-vulnerability factors linked to national origin, generational status (such as foreign-born versus third generation), immigration status, and level of English language proficiency.⁶⁶ For example, the poverty rate among foreign-born families originating in Mexico was 27.8% in 2012, as opposed to 14.0% for families from South America. Over two-thirds (69.4%) of U.S. families born in Mexico have limited English language skills, compared with less than half (44.7%) of South American-born families, which further contributes to difficulties in achieving economic stability.⁶⁷

Asian Homeless Families

More than one in ten (11.8%) Asian families with children in the U.S. lived in poverty in 2012, slightly less than the rate for white families (Figure 8). Asian families were also greatly underrepresented in homelessness statistics (one in 4,065 [Figure 9]).⁶⁸ When viewed as a homogenous group, Asian households appear to be the least likely of the main racial and ethnic groups to experience homelessness. However, some Asian ethnicities are among the poorest and least educated of all minority groups in the country. In particular, Hmong immigrants (an ethnic group from China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand) and persons from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Bangladesh struggle with high poverty, language barriers, low educational attainment and per capita incomes, and overcrowding.⁶⁹ For example, the low poverty rate in 2012 for all Asian families with children (11.8%) masks the fact that poverty among families born in Laos (23.2%), Cambodia (23.2%), Thailand (22.5%), and Vietnam (16.0%) was much higher.⁷⁰

Cultural attitudes toward domestic violence could also be contributing to lower rates of homelessness among Asians. Domestic violence is a common reason for homelessness

among women with children generally, but research within some Asian communities has highlighted cultural norms attaching strong stigma and shame to family violence that prevent women from seeking assistance. Other studies have identified cultural acceptance of violence against women. Both would discourage Asian victims of domestic violence from seeking agency-based assistance and therefore lead to data that reflect falsely low incidence. Simultaneously, the belief held by mainstream society that domestic violence is rare among Asian families serves to limit the availability of specialized supportive resources.⁷¹

Local Disparities by Race or Ethnicity

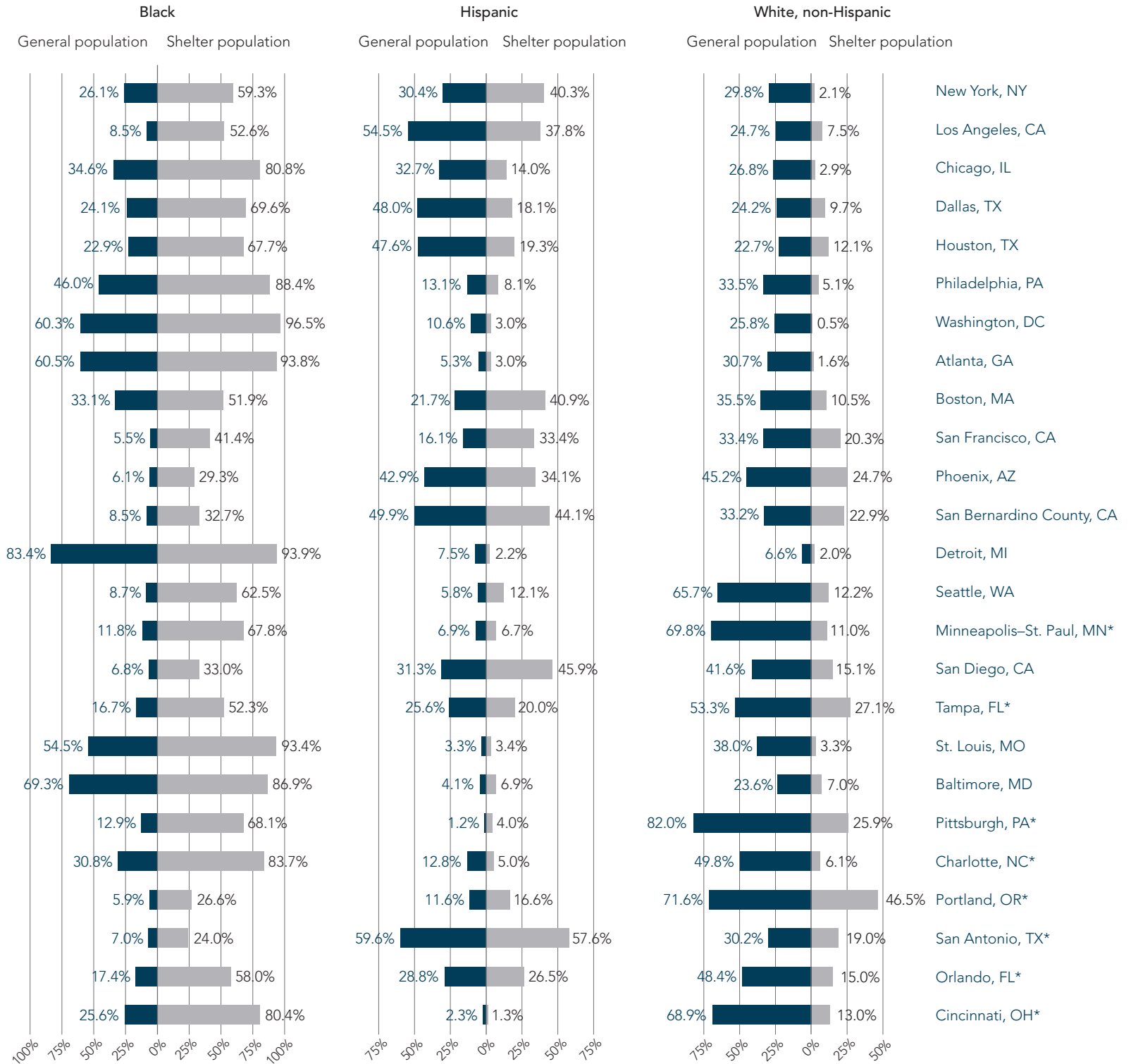
To explore the relationship between race and homelessness in more detail, Fiscal Year 2011 data were examined for white, black, and Hispanic homeless families in the largest 25 cities for which data were available (Figure 11—see next page).⁷² Due to their low rates of homelessness in urban settings, AIAN and Asian families were not included. Rural or suburban areas were also not considered due to a lack of available data.⁷³ Across these 25 cities, persons in black families experienced higher rates of homelessness (1.15%) than Hispanic (0.40%) and white families (0.07%). Similarly, the proportion of persons in shelter from black families (63.0%) was much higher than the percentage of blacks in the residential population (22.3%, a percentage point difference of 40.7%). Hispanics were slightly underrepresented in shelter (29.9%, versus 31.3%), while whites were severely underrepresented (6.2%) compared with the residential population (36.8%, a percentage point difference of 30.6%).

Hope for the Future

Although government-sanctioned racial and ethnic discrimination may be a relic of the past, minority groups are still overrepresented in shelter when compared with whites due to prejudice and substantial access barriers to decent employment, education, health care, and housing. The nature and expression of biases vary by racial and ethnic group, but the effects are similar: longstanding poverty, higher unemployment, lower educational attainment and earned income, considerable gaps in wealth accumulation, and homelessness.

Despite research consistently showing that many minorities often fare worse economically, it is important to note that society is continuously changing. Just as policies and attitudes created these inequities and biases over time, if adjusted, they can actively serve to shape a more equal society for future generations. Homelessness preventative and supportive services, identification and outreach efforts, and policy formation must be culturally sensitive and informed of the inequalities leading to greater vulnerability for each racial or ethnic minority group.

Figure 11
Percent of Family Members in the General and Shelter Populations, 2011
 (by race or ethnicity and largest metropolitan area)



* Data for Minneapolis–St. Paul includes Hennepin and Ramsey counties; Tampa includes Hillsborough County; Pittsburgh includes Allegheny County; Charlotte includes Mecklenburg County; Portland includes Multnomah County; San Antonio includes Bexar County; Orlando includes Orange, Osceola, and Seminole counties; and Cincinnati includes Hamilton County. Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *AHAR Exchange Public Reports: 2011 Comprehensive Report of Sheltered Homeless Persons*; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008–12 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates.