

Homeless in Minnesota: A closer look

Families and children

Wilder Research Center

Homelessness is especially traumatic for children. Studies of homeless children show that they have more health problems than children with housing, even poor children. They have more trouble learning to develop healthy relationships and staying on track in their education. Long-term studies show that they are more likely than other children to be homeless as adults, and that young adulthood is a particularly risky time of life for them.



The numbers

- Minnesota's shelters served 1,323 homeless families with 2,724 children on October 23, 2003 – more than triple the numbers in 1991. Most (69%) were in transitional housing.
- Over one-quarter of homeless adults had at least one child with them.
- More than 4 in 10 homeless children were younger than 6.
- Parents and children of color are disproportionately homeless. Among homeless families, only 37 percent are headed by White adults, compared to 92 percent of all Minnesota families. (See table 8, page 9.)
- An estimated 10,600 children were either homeless or living in temporary arrangements on any recent night.
- The 2003 survey was the first since 1991 to find no increase in homeless families and children statewide. However, if we exclude Hennepin County, the numbers in the rest of the state continued to rise. (See page 12.)

How children are affected

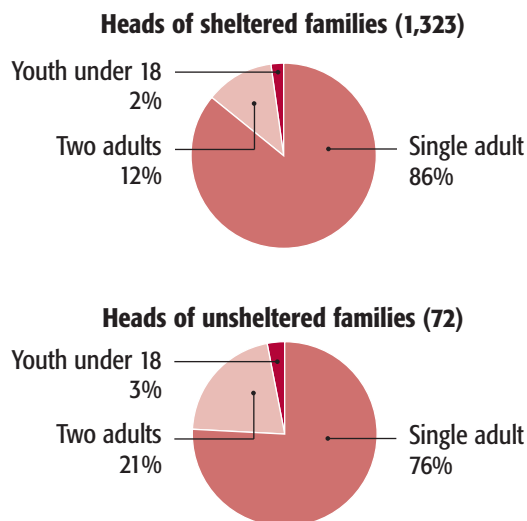
- Homeless children in the 2003 survey were more likely than other Minnesota children to have physical or mental disabilities and problems with school attendance and achievement.
- One-quarter of parents with preschool children had a child enrolled in Head Start or another early education program, down from one-third in 2000.
- 70% of parents were able to obtain regular child care when they needed it, sustaining an improvement found in the 2000 survey.
- Among families with school-age children, 38% report children with learning or school problems, and 25% had children who had repeated a grade.
- Only 8% of homeless parents reported that their school-age children had trouble attending school because of their housing situation, the lowest rate since 1991.

What parents are dealing with

- Homeless parents have high rates of chronic physical and mental illness, as well as substance abuse disorders; 61% had at least one of these problems in the 2003 survey.
- Many mothers were homeless as a result of domestic violence (28% in the metro area, 44% in greater Minnesota).
- Over half of homeless parents had been homeless this time for a year or more, and over one-third had been homeless before.
- Nearly 1 in 10 parents were homeless themselves as children.
- 63% were on a waiting list for subsidized housing, with an average wait of 12 months.
- 28% of homeless parents were working, 13% full-time. Half of them were earning less than \$10 per hour.
- On average, homeless parents said they could afford to pay \$401 in monthly rent.

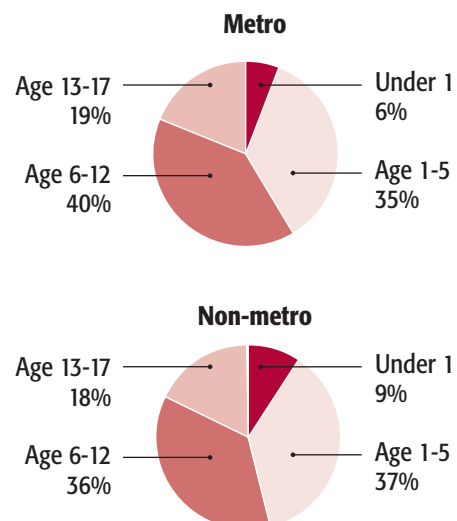
This brief is based on the 2003 Minnesota statewide survey, which has covered the needs and characteristics of homeless adults and children since 1991. Other than small, specialized studies, most surveys of homeless people include only adults, and include little information about the children who are with them. This is one of the richest available sources of point-in-time and trend data about homeless children and their parents. Details on the survey are found on page 15.

1. A single adult heads most homeless families in Minnesota



Source: Wilder Research Center

2. Ages of homeless children



Source: Wilder Research Center

Key facts at a glance

10,000 a night in temporary arrangements

On Oct. 23, 2003, Minnesota's emergency shelters, battered women's shelters, and transitional housing programs were providing shelter to 1,323 homeless families including 2,724 children age 17 and younger, and 141 unaccompanied youth age 8 to 17. Using conservative estimates based on studies done elsewhere, another 7,736 children and youth were "doubling up," or staying temporarily with family or friends. The total estimated number of children who were homeless or in unstable or temporary housing in Minnesota on any given night is 10,601.

Homeless families not in shelters

That figure does not include children staying with their parents in places not meant for human habitation, such as in cars, under bridges, and in abandoned buildings. Although the statewide study is not designed to systematically find or count unsheltered families, our results do include 72 parents in such situations, who had a total of 138 children with them. This study does not include most families who lack a place of their own to live and are staying with friends or family (which is especially common in greater Minnesota).

Fastest-growing segment

Homeless families and children have made up the fastest-growing segment of homeless people in Minnesota since the statewide homeless survey began in 1991. The numbers in 2003 are more than three times the 875 homeless children found in 1991. These findings parallel national studies that also show faster growth in the numbers of homeless families than among homeless single adults.

Many homeless adults have children who are not with them

Fifty-two percent of homeless adults were parents of children age 17 or younger, yet only 28 percent had children with them. Five percent had at least one child who was not with them because of program restrictions at the shelter.

Homeless children tend to be young

Forty-three percent of homeless children were age 5 or younger (including 7% who were less than 1 year old). Thirty-eight percent were age 6 to 12, and 18 percent were 13 to 17. Children in greater Minnesota were slightly younger than those in the metro area.

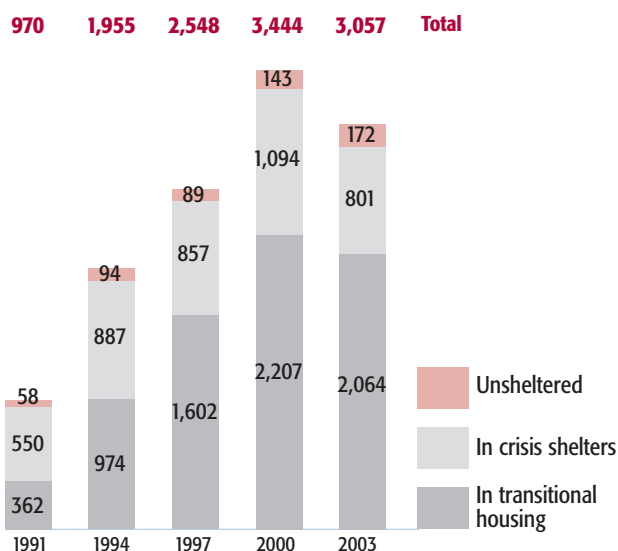
Most families are in transitional housing

Sixty-nine percent of homeless parents with children were staying in transitional housing programs. Emergency shelters and battered women's shelters each served 13 percent of parents. Only 5 percent were in non-sheltered situations. In greater Minnesota, only 60 percent of parents were in transitional housing, compared to 73 percent in the metro area. Parents in greater Minnesota were more likely than metro parents to be in battered women's shelters (16% vs. 11%) or in non-sheltered or unknown arrangements (13% vs. 1%).

Most children are with one parent

Most homeless households with children were headed by single adults who had never married or were divorced, separated, or widowed. Only 12 percent of homeless families with children were headed by couples.

3. Homeless children and youth in Minnesota, 1991-2003



A DEEPER LOOK

As you read this briefing, please keep in mind that the information comes from a one-night survey. People who are homeless frequently or for a long time are more likely to be found by such a study than people who are homeless only once or for a short time. This means that:

- The actual number of homeless families is almost certainly under-represented in this study, since parents with children tend to be homeless for shorter times than adults without children.
- This study will tend to under-report the characteristics that are more common among families homeless for only a short time. For example, since women in the short-term shelters are more than twice as likely to be fleeing domestic violence (compared to women in longer-term transitional housing), the true incidence of this problem among all homeless families over the course of a year is higher than the 33 percent found in this one-time study.

Children's health, nutrition, and mental health

Studies show that children in poor families have more physical and mental health problems than those in non-poor families, and homeless families have more of these problems than poor families. While homelessness has lasting consequences for children at any age, the effects are especially harmful in the earliest years of life.

Poor health among homeless adults and children probably reflects a mix of cause and effect, and it is difficult to separate the influences of homelessness and poverty, since most homeless families are also poor. On the one hand, people who live in poor neighborhoods are exposed to more environmental hazards (including lead, poor air and water quality, and crime) that can cause physical and mental disabilities. On the other hand, some people with disabilities are more likely to be or become poor as a result of a decreased ability to work or to make and maintain strong social networks.

Homeless parents are often separated from their children. Some shelters, to protect vulnerable clients, do not allow older boys or fathers to stay in the same place as women and younger children. In some jurisdictions, children may be placed in foster care if their parents become homeless. Sometimes homeless parents prefer to place children unofficially with family or friends in order to keep them housed. Whether or not children stay with their parents during an episode of homelessness, the experience is likely to interfere with their development of skills for forming and maintaining healthy, stable relationships.

Chronic or severe physical health problems

Sixteen percent of homeless parents reported that at least one of their homeless children had a chronic or severe physical health problem. That is the same rate as in the 2000 survey. It is higher than among Minnesota children in general (11%), but about the same as the rates among poor and near-poor families in Minnesota (15%). The ages of homeless children with these problems are similar to the ages of all homeless children.

Access to health care

Most homeless parents reported being able to obtain health care for their children when needed, but 6 percent reported that there had been occasions during the past year when they had been unable to obtain

needed physical health care for their children. Seventeen percent had been unable to obtain needed dental care, and 3 percent had been unable to obtain needed mental health care. Parents in greater Minnesota had more difficulty obtaining care for their children, especially dental care (24% were unable to obtain it in greater Minnesota, compared to 13% in the metro area).

Missed meals

Seven percent of homeless parents reported at least one child had to skip meals in the previous month because there had not been enough money to buy food. This is down from the 11 percent who reported children missing meals in 2000.

Emotional or behavioral problems

Twenty-three percent of homeless parents reported that at least one of their children had an emotional or behavioral problem that interfered with their daily activities. This is about the same rate as in 2000. It is twice the incidence among low-income families in the general population, and nearly four times the rate for all Minnesota households. Children with emotional or behavioral problems were slightly older than those with physical health problems: one-quarter (25%) were age 0 to 5, nearly half (47%) were age 6 to 12, and 28 percent were age 13 to 17. Children's emotional or behavioral problems were especially prevalent among families who had been homeless for a year or longer.

Separation from parents

As in prior years, most parents whose minor children were not with them reported that those children were being cared for by the other parent (68%). Others reported that their children were in the care of a grandparent (20%) or other family member (16%). Eight percent had a child in foster care, and 7 percent had given up a child for adoption. Five percent of parents reported that at least one of their children was not with them at the time of the survey because of program restrictions in the shelter.

Children's education

Although education is an important pathway out of poverty, poverty itself can introduce serious barriers to getting an adequate education. Homelessness is one of the more serious barriers. Unsafe or unstable housing and frequent moves often reduce attendance and impair children's ability to concentrate. Other barriers to homeless children's school attendance and success include problems with transportation, difficulty obtaining prior school records, and lack of appropriate hygiene, clothing, and school supplies. Federal law requires that schools help homeless children to overcome some of these barriers.

Early care and education

About one-quarter (26%) of parents with children under 6 reported that at least one of their children was enrolled in Head Start or some other early education program. This number is down from the 34 percent enrolled in early childhood programs in 2000. About two-thirds (70%) of parents had been able to obtain regular child care when they needed it during the previous year, up from 54 percent in 1997 and similar to the 68 percent in 2000.

Learning or school problems

Thirty-eight percent of homeless parents reported at least one of their children age 6 or older had a learning or school problem. That is between the 41 percent in 2000 and 36 percent in 1997. Twenty-five percent reported a child had repeated a grade, about the same as in 2000 (26%). Learning problems were higher among children who had been homeless for a year or longer, and grade repetition was more common among children who had been homeless repeatedly for shorter times.

School attendance

Eighty-eight percent of homeless parents reported that all of their school-age children attended school on the date of the survey. This percentage has been close to 90 percent since the study began in 1991. Among children who did

not attend school on the day of the survey, 25 percent were age 8 or younger, 31 percent were age 9 to 12, and 43 percent were age 13 to 17.

Eight percent of parents reported that their children had trouble going to school because of their housing situation, down from a range between 11 and 14 percent from 1991 to 2000. The problem was greatest among the small number of families who were staying outdoors (57%) or doubling up with family or friends (35%), compared to 15 percent of families in crisis shelters and only 3 percent in transitional housing.

Forty-two percent of parents reported that all of their children were still attending the same school as before. Most of the remainder indicated that their children had changed schools because they had moved to a new town or district (29%). Other reasons were because the child's next grade was in a new school (4%), the parent wanted them in a new school (4%), or the child needed different school-related services. Only 2 percent of parents reported that their children had changed schools because the previous school could not or would not help them stay.

Homeless students in the Saint Paul Schools

From September 2003 through mid-April 2004, the Saint Paul Public Schools provided special services to 767 students known to be homeless, including support for school enrollment, transportation coordination, school supplies, and evening tutoring in the shelters. The following information from their records provides further perspective on the characteristics of homeless children:

Of those whose homeless status was known, 23 percent were receiving special education services (compared to 12% in the state as a whole, and 16% in the Saint Paul district as a whole).

Of homeless students who were enrolled in school, 81 percent attended only one school during the year after they started receiving services. Seventeen percent attended two schools, and 2 percent attended three or more. Because these figures include only students whose homeless status was known to the school district and who were receiving services, these figures under-represent the total number of school changes among all homeless students.

Because of the frequency of homeless children's moves, the district is unable to record all the different places they have lived. As a conservative estimate, district records show 1,150 different places these 767 children had lived during the part of the school year while they were in the program, or an average of 1½ places each. Of these, most (75%) were in shelters. An additional 16 percent were in the community, including doubled-up with family or friends, in a car, or outdoors. Five percent were in hotels, and 3 percent were in emergency foster care.

Source: Saint Paul Public Schools (some calculations by Wilder Research Center)

Parents' housing history and access to housing

In Minnesota and nationwide, there is a growing gap between housing costs and wages, especially for workers with less than a college education. There is no place in the United States where a full-time, minimum-wage worker can afford the fair market rent for a one-bedroom apartment (as defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development).

During the 1990s, the trends in wages and housing costs combined with a decline in the number of low-cost housing units. At the same time, federal housing subsidies for poor households were also shrinking in proportion to the need.

The shortage of affordable housing is clearly a large contributing factor to the causes of homelessness among families and single adults. It also increases the length of time that people are homeless, making it hard for them to move out of shelters and thereby free up space for other homeless people.

Evidence from evaluation studies suggests that, while services have an important role to play in helping homeless people regain stable housing, the availability of affordable housing itself is a necessary condition without which the services are unlikely to be successful.

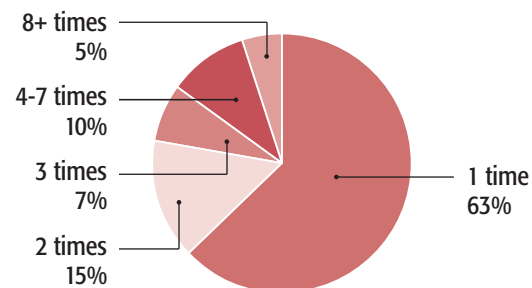
Domestic violence

Thirty-three percent of mothers reported that they were homeless because of abuse by a partner. These rates are much higher in greater Minnesota (44%) than in the Twin Cities metro area (28%). Parents in greater Minnesota were also more likely to report being in an abusive relationship within the past 12 months, seeking medical care for injuries caused by violence, and having stayed in an abusive situation for lack of any other housing option.

Prior experiences with homelessness

Eight percent of homeless parents had been homeless as a child. For 63 percent of homeless parents (compared with 57% of non-parenting adults), this was the first time they had been homeless. Those rates are similar to those in 2000. Parents in greater Minnesota were slightly more likely to have been homeless before (only 61% were homeless for the first time, compared to 64% of metro area parents).

4. Number of times parent has been homeless in his or her life



Source: Wilder Research Center

Length of time homeless

Fifty-eight percent of parents had been homeless for six months or less, and 31 percent had been homeless for a year or more. Long-term homelessness was more common among metro area parents, where 33 percent had been homeless a year or longer, compared to 26 percent in greater Minnesota.

The proportion of parents who had been homeless for over a year grew from 14 percent in 1991 to 31 percent in 2003. This may reflect the increase in the share of parents being served in transitional housing programs (from 43% in 1991 to 69% in 2003), an increase in the length of transitional services, or a shortage of affordable housing to move to after a temporary shelter stay.

Unsheltered families

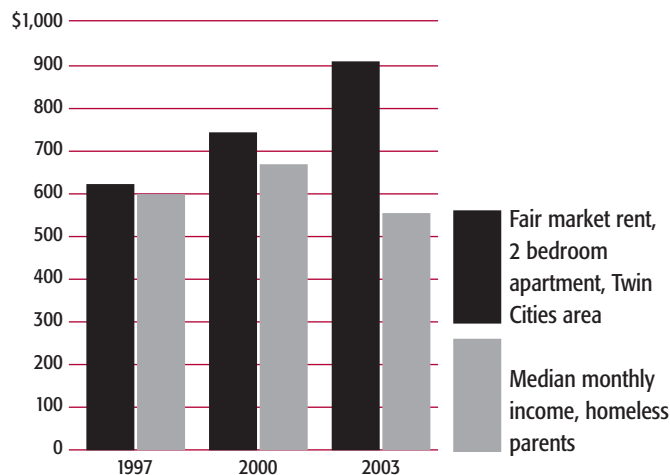
Five percent of the parents in the statewide survey were not using the shelter system at the time. This proportion was much lower in the metro area (1%) than in greater Minnesota (13%). It was also lower among parents than among non-parenting adults, of whom 15 percent were not in shelters. We do not know where the unsheltered families slept at night, but the most likely possibilities include vehicles and abandoned buildings, semi-sheltered public places such as bus stations or building stairwells, and – most common for parents with children – temporary stays with friends or family. Because this study is not designed to find all homeless people not using shelters, we do not know how many more unsheltered families there were in Minnesota. Evidence from other studies suggests that our findings accurately reflect a common

pattern in which homeless families outside of urban areas are less likely to use shelters.

During the month of October 2003, non-parenting adults in the survey stayed outside for an average of 3.5 nights, compared to an average of 0.5 nights for homeless parents. Parents in greater Minnesota were much more likely to spend at least some nights outside (1.3 average) than were metro-area parents (0.3 average).

Parents were also less likely than single adults to have been turned away in attempts to obtain shelter. Twelve percent of parents (11% in the metro area, 14% in greater Minnesota) said they had been turned away in the preceding three months due to lack of bed space, compared to 24 percent of non-parents. When this happened, parents were most likely to end up sleeping

5. Comparing fair market rent and median monthly income of homeless parents in Minnesota



Sources: Homeless data, Wilder Research Center. Fair market rents, Wilder calculations using data from U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

6. Homeless parents' housing needs and ability to pay, compared to fair market rents

Size needed	Percent of homeless parents needing this size apartment	Average amount parent could pay per month	Fair market rent, 2003
Greater Minnesota parents			
0 (efficiency)	3%	\$373	\$317
1 bedroom	3%	\$252	\$393
2 bedrooms	47%	\$316	\$498
3 bedrooms	37%	\$353	\$634
4 bedrooms	8%	\$396	\$733
5 bedrooms	1%	\$380	\$843
Metro-area parents			
0 (efficiency)	6%	\$308	\$554
1 bedroom	9%	\$303	\$713
2 bedrooms	39%	\$384	\$912
3 bedrooms	35%	\$485	\$1,233
4 bedrooms	9%	\$539	\$1,397
5 bedrooms	3%	\$579	\$1,607

Sources: Homeless data, Wilder Research Center, 2003; fair market rents, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (some calculations by Wilder)

in a friend or family member's house (45%). Next most common was a shelter, church, or motel for which they were given a voucher (33% in the metro area, 41% in greater Minnesota), or sleeping in a car or abandoned building (6% in the metro area, 12% in greater Minnesota).

Ability to pay rent

Asked what prevented them from getting housing, homeless parents most commonly mentioned the lack of any housing they could afford. Homeless parents said they could afford to pay an average of \$401 per month for housing (\$430 metro, \$336 greater Minnesota). This average includes the 7 percent who said they could not pay anything at all. Reflecting the lower employment rates compared to previous years, the amount that parents could pay was lower than in either 1997 (average \$471, in dollars adjusted to 2003 values) or 2000 (\$536 in adjusted dollars). Standard guidelines consider housing affordable if it costs no more than 30 percent of a household's monthly income; this is especially important for low-income families, who do not have as much left for basic needs after paying for housing. Graph 5 shows that fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment has exceeded the actual monthly income reported by homeless parents since 1997.

Size of apartment needed

Forty-one percent of parents said they would need two bedrooms, and 47 percent would need three or more. Table 6 shows what size apartments homeless families would need, what they could afford to pay, and the current fair market rents at the time of the survey.

Access to subsidized housing

On the date of the survey, nearly two-thirds of homeless parents (63%) were on a waiting list for subsidized housing, and had been waiting for an average of 12 months (15 in the metro area, 6 in greater Minnesota). Another 17 percent had tried to get on a waiting list but were unable to because it was closed. During the past two years, 6 percent had received a housing voucher they were unable to use because no landlord would accept it (5% metro, 7% greater Minnesota). In each of these categories, homeless parents reported more trouble accessing subsidized housing than non-parenting adults.

As table 7 shows, parents had more trouble in 2003 than in 2000 in all categories except unusable vouchers. The percentage of homeless families on a waiting list for subsidized housing has grown from 44 percent in 1991 to 63 percent in 2003.

7. Homeless parents' access to subsidized housing

	2000	2003
On a waiting list for subsidized housing	55%	63%
Average months on waiting list	10	12
Unable to get on a waiting list because it was closed	12%	17%
Had a voucher in past 2 years but found no place to accept it	14%	6%

Source: Wilder Research Center

8. Race and ethnicity of homeless parents

Race or ethnicity of parent	% of all Minnesota families	% of homeless families
American Indian	1%	9%
Asian American	2%	1%
Black or African American	3%	45%
White or Caucasian	92%	38%
Other, including mixed race	1%	6%
Hispanic (may be of any race)	2%	6%

Sources: Data on homeless parents, Wilder Research Center, 2003; data on general population, Census 2000

Parents' health and disabilities

Personal characteristics and experiences also can contribute to homelessness, and are more likely to contribute to loss of housing among families who have fewer resources. Studies elsewhere have found that homeless parents are more likely than others to have chronic health conditions and mental health problems (especially depression). Such problems do not always interfere with stable employment or housing, but the fewer other personal, social, and financial resources a person has, the greater the chance they will be unable to weather typical crises. Based on national research, the Urban Institute estimates that around 1 in 10 poor households are living close enough to the edge of their resources that they are at risk of becoming homeless at any time.

Chronic physical health problems

Thirty-nine percent of homeless parents report having at least one serious, chronic physical health problem (such as asthma, high blood pressure, or diabetes). This includes 41 percent of metro area parents, and 35 percent of parents in greater Minnesota. Of the parents with chronic health problems, 16 percent had not received care for one or more of their conditions during the previous year (13% in the metro area, 24% in greater Minnesota).

Substance abuse

Seventeen percent of homeless parents considered themselves alcoholic or chemically dependent, less than half the rate among non-parenting homeless adults (41%). Seven percent reported they left their last housing because of a drinking or drug problem, compared with 25 percent of homeless non-parents. Eleven percent said that a health professional had told them in the last two years that they had an alcohol and/or drug abuse disorder. Seven percent of parents had a dual diagnosis of at least one mental health problem and a drug or alcohol abuse disorder, up from the rates in 1997 and 2000. This is one-third of the rate for homeless non-parents (21%) in 2003.

Mental health problems

Forty-one percent of parents have recently been diagnosed with or treated for a serious or persistent mental health disorder. The mental illness rates for parents are lower than for the overall homeless population (47%). The most common mental health problem reported by parents was major depression (27% of parents), followed by post-traumatic stress disorder (14%). Those rates are all up significantly since the 2000 survey, and are the highest since the survey began in 1991. Mental illness rates for homeless parents are very similar in the metro area and greater Minnesota. Among those reporting a serious mental illness, 25 percent in the metro area and 27 percent in greater Minnesota reported that they had not received care for their condition in the past year.

At the time of the survey, 39 percent of parents felt they needed to see a medical professional about an emotional or mental health problem. This was up sharply from the 23 percent who expressed such a need in 2000.

Only 39 percent of homeless parents (and only 28 percent of non-parenting adults) did not have a chronic physical health problem, mental health problem, or substance abuse disorder. Parents who had such problems were more likely than non-parents to have received care for them within the past 12 months: 71 percent of parents had received care for each such problem they had, compared to 61 percent of non-parents.

Employment and income of parents

For most people, employment is the way to acquire the income needed to afford housing. Work is also increasingly a necessary condition for receiving a variety of forms of public assistance, including welfare, Food Stamps, and child care subsidy. However, as mentioned above, some people may be unable to earn enough in a full-time job to afford housing.

People without housing usually find it harder to keep or get jobs. In addition, many of the health conditions and problems that are more common among homeless people also interfere with employment, including chronic physical health conditions and mental illness. The extra care needs of children with health or mental health problems can also make it hard for parents to maintain stable employment. Other employment barriers common among people experiencing homelessness include lack of reliable child care and transportation, and lack of education and training suitable for the jobs that are available.

Employment

Twenty-eight percent of homeless parents were working at the time of the survey (27% in the metro area, 30% in greater Minnesota). Thirteen percent were working full-time. Those proportions are similar to rates in 1997, but below the peak employment rates found in 2000. They are about the same for parents as for all homeless adults. Sixty-one percent of employed parents (compared to 76% of non-parents) earned wages of less than \$10 per hour. Among metro-area parents, 52 percent of parents earned less than \$10 per hour, compared with 77 percent in greater Minnesota.

Twenty-four percent of homeless parents had left their last housing because they had lost a job or had their hours cut. This was the fifth most frequent reason cited (among multiple possible reasons), after being unable

to afford the rent or monthly payments (34%), eviction or foreclosure (29%), a breakup with a spouse or partner (27%), and abuse by someone else in the household (25%).

Sources of income

Among homeless parents, 23 percent reported their main source of income was from steady employment (21% in the metro area, 26% in greater Minnesota). Another 6 percent received some income from steady employment. Fifty percent reported the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP, or welfare) as their main source of income. (For a single parent with two children, MFIP would be a main source of income if the parent's wages were less than about \$380 per month, in which case the maximum cash grant would be between \$380 and \$532 per month.)

Eight percent had been laid off in the preceding six months, of whom only 12 percent had received unemployment benefits. Nearly one-quarter (23%) of homeless parents had lost MFIP benefits during the preceding year.

Child support

Nearly half (46%) of women, and 40 percent of men, reported that there was an order for at least one of their children to receive child support. Fifty-eight percent of men reported that support was being provided for all of their eligible children, but only 34 percent of women said it was. Eighteen percent of all parents, and 35 percent of those with child support orders, reported receiving at least some income from child support in the month of the survey.

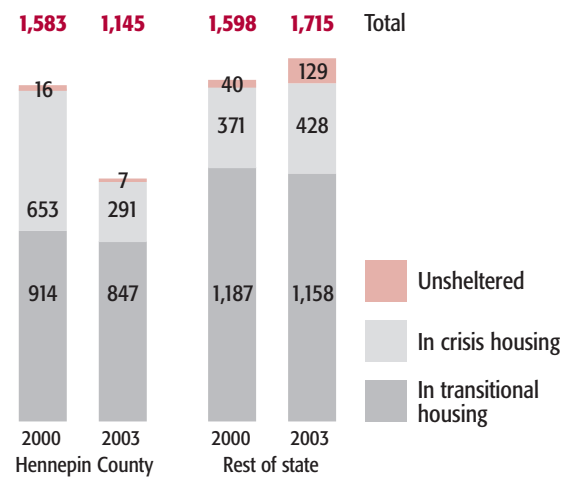
WHAT IS HAPPENING IN HENNEPIN COUNTY?

While the number of homeless families and children continued to rise in most of Minnesota from 2000 to 2003, it dropped sharply in Hennepin County. The following information is a preliminary examination of some of the factors that are likely associated with the changes in Hennepin County. It is based on information provided by county officials with some additional analysis of data from the Wilder study.

The chart below illustrates two important points:

- A large proportion of all homeless children and families in the state are in Hennepin County.
- Between 2000 and 2003, Hennepin County significantly reduced its number of homeless children, especially in crisis settings, while the numbers in the rest of the state continued to rise.

Change in number of homeless children, 2000-2003



Sources: Wilder Research Center

Hennepin County officials report that the following changes since 2000 have contributed to the steep drop in numbers of families in shelters (178 fewer county-funded beds per night):

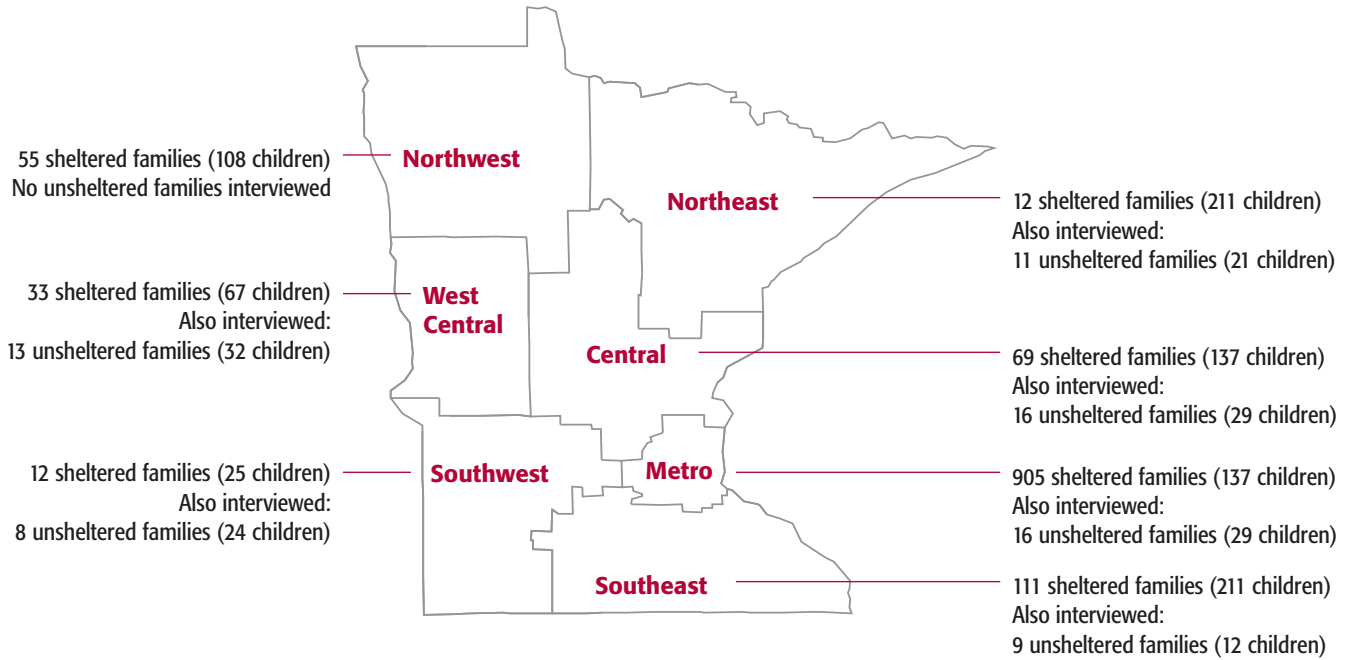
- When a family requests emergency shelter, a county intake screener helps them identify other housing options. This might involve helping with admission to a battered women's shelter, talking to a landlord who may have evicted the family illegally, or helping with transportation to a relative or friend who is willing to provide housing.

- The county actively seeks to prevent the loss of housing, not only to respond to a crisis after the family has lost it.
- When families do need to use the county's emergency shelter services, county staff help them immediately develop a plan to exit shelter into housing. Staff help them begin receiving all services for which they are eligible, and these are coordinated into one comprehensive plan for the family.
- When families leave shelters, they are told to call the county immediately for additional help if anything happens that jeopardizes their new housing.
- The county has not enacted any policy changes to refuse shelter to families with no housing alternatives, or to limit the length or frequency of shelter stay.

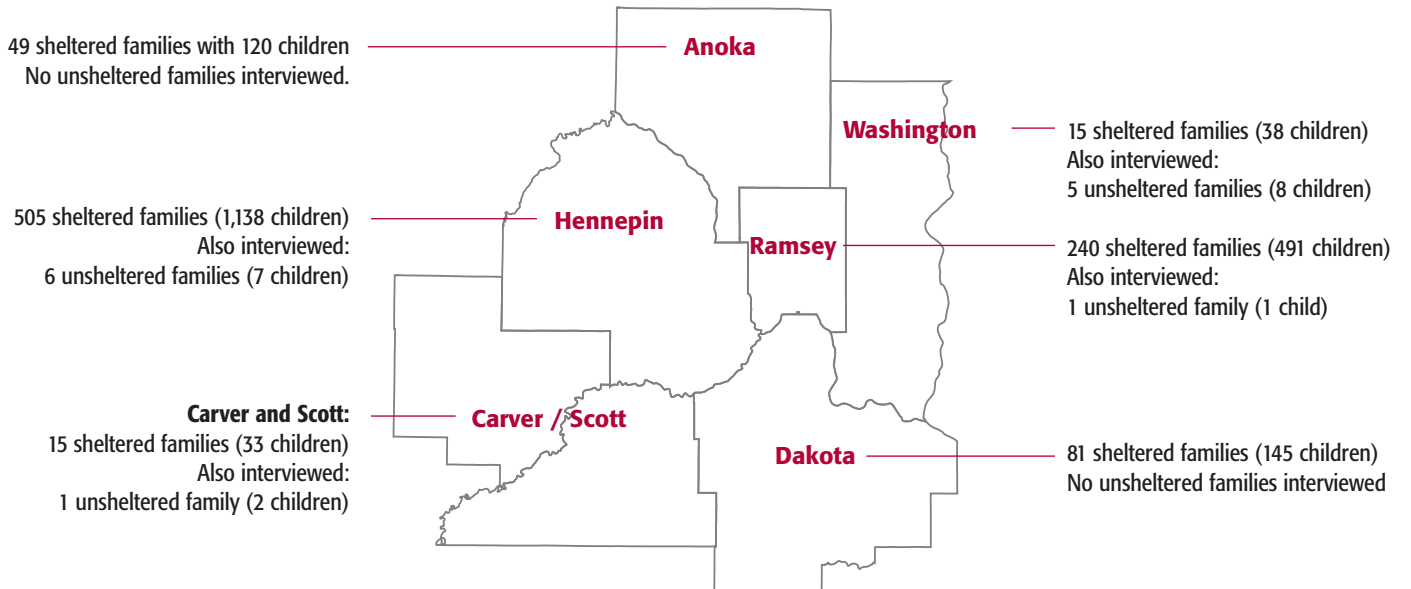
The Wilder survey indicates that parents who were in Hennepin County emergency shelters in 2003 appear to have a higher level of needs than the larger group of families in 2000. More had been abused as children, and more had substance abuse or mental health problems. While they were still disproportionately African American and American Indian, the disparity was not as great in 2003 as in 2000.

The 2003 survey does not suggest that Hennepin County parents in need of shelter were not receiving it. Hennepin County parents who were surveyed were no more likely than those in Ramsey County to report that they had been denied shelter recently because of a lack of space. Compared to Ramsey County parents, Hennepin County parents who had been turned away were more likely to have ended up sleeping with family or friends, and less likely to be served by a church or another shelter or safe home.

Homeless families and children in Minnesota, 2003



Homeless families and children in the metro area, 2003



Source: Wilder Research Center with data from service providers

Some issues to consider

The continued growth in the number of homeless children – throughout the state except in Hennepin County – is cause for concern. Not only does it raise the likelihood of a future increase in homeless adults, but it also reveals the vulnerability of many of our state’s children to worse health, less stable relationships, and lower educational opportunity. While the survey shows evidence that schools are having more success helping homeless children stay in place, there is not corresponding evidence that children’s attendance is improving or their learning problems decreasing. Further progress in these areas may require initiatives and resources from public and private systems beyond the schools.

The 2003 study shows a decreasing availability of housing vouchers, from a level that was already seriously inadequate. There also appears to be a need to help some voucher-holders, especially those with criminal records or poor credit histories, to find property owners willing to rent to them. There is also a serious shortage of larger units for larger families. Support services that assist both tenants and owners may be important in helping people with more barriers to find and stay in their own housing.

Differences between the Twin Cities metro area and greater Minnesota show not only higher rates of mental illness and domestic violence outside the Twin Cities, but also less access to help for these or other critical

needs. The scarcity of services is likely related to the continued growth in homelessness among families in greater Minnesota, and the especially troubling growth in the proportion of children in the less stable, emergency shelter settings.

By contrast, the homelessness prevention and shelter diversion approaches being implemented in Hennepin County appear to have reduced the number of families using the shelter system. While this survey cannot shed light on the well-being of those who were enabled or encouraged to avoid the shelters, it does suggest that they did not simply go to different shelters or become unsheltered. It would be useful to undertake a separate study to determine the status and stability of those who were helped to double-up with friends or family, especially in light of findings from this study that the school stability of children in doubled-up families may be nearly as poor as that among children in families living on the streets.

No matter how good the services for homeless people, we will not solve the problem of homelessness until we stop the flow of people into homelessness. To do this, it is clear that we must at a minimum address both the affordability of housing (on the income side and on the housing cost side) and the need for treatment and support for the often multiple physical and mental health problems among parents and children.

Additional reading

- “The characteristics and needs of sheltered homeless and low-income housed mothers,” *Journal of the American Medical Association*, August 28, 1996.
- *Helping America’s homeless*, The Urban Institute Press, 2001.
- *Kids Mobility Project report*, Family Housing Fund (<http://fhhfund.org>), March 1998.
- “A snapshot of family homelessness across America,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Summer 1999.

For more information

This briefing paper presents a closer look at issues related to homelessness, drawing from Wilder's 2003 statewide survey. For more information about this report, contact Ellen Shelton or Greg Owen at Wilder Research Center, 651-647-4600. As additional briefing papers are available, they will be posted on the Wilder Research Center web site (www.wilder.org/research). To learn about new reports available on our web site, you can sign up for the free bimonthly *Random Sampler* newsletter at www.wilder.org/research.



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About the statewide homelessness study

Every three years since 1991, Wilder Research Center has conducted a statewide survey of people who are homeless or living in temporary housing programs. On October 23, 2003, more than 700 trained volunteer interviewers conducted face-to-face interviews with about 3,100 people experiencing homelessness. This took place in nearly 250 places throughout Minnesota, including about 220 emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, and battered women's shelters. In addition to the representative sample of sheltered people, a non-representative sample of nearly 800 homeless people not currently in shelters were interviewed in 40 cities and towns by experienced outreach workers. Adults who are staying temporarily with family or friends are not included in the study because they do not fit the federal (HUD) definition of "homeless." For details on study methods and results, see the full report, "Minnesota statewide survey of persons without permanent shelter," found on the Wilder Research Center web site (www.wilder.org/research).

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Families and children

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