

Talking Through the Numbers – Episode 1

Homelessness is More Than Just a Math Problem

Through interviews with researchers, community leaders, and service providers, Wilder Research Executive Director Paul Mattessich examines pressing issues facing our communities today to offer insight beyond the numbers.

This episode of Talking Through the Numbers is available online at <https://www.wilder.org/featured-media/homelessness-more-just-math-problem>

Transcript

[soft piano music]

Paul: Hello. I'm Paul Mattessich, Executive Director of Wilder Research. Welcome to this first podcast by Wilder Research. The goal of these podcasts is to provide insight on significant issues, and to combine sound information derived from research with expert knowledge to enrich understanding about things that are important to all of us. Today's topic, homelessness, and the guest experts are two individuals. Senta Leff is Executive Director of the Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless. She brings two decades of experience to the topic that we will discuss today, serving in board and staff leadership positions in several human services organizations, especially in the field of housing and homelessness.

Paul: Michelle Gerrard, our other guest, is a Senior Research Manager at Wilder Research. She's led a wide variety of studies related to homelessness, supportive housing, other aspects of housing. Her work is recognized widely, and in fact, Michelle, in a couple of months you're going to be traveling. You'll bring one of your studies to an international audience at a conference on Effective Strategies for Working with Involuntary Clients to be held in Prato, Italy. So again, welcome, and we will get into the topic. First of all, just to set the stage to give us a framework, a basis for discussion, Michelle. Homelessness. Is it going up, down, staying the same? How many people are involved?

Michelle: First I should say ciao, because I keep working on my Italian.

Paul: Ciao. Yeah, right.

Michelle: What we have found over the course of the last several years is that homelessness was down slightly between 2012 and 2015. During our last study, which was in October of

2015, we counted 9,300 people who were homeless in Minnesota on one night. Now we know that our studies.-Paul: 9,300?

Michelle: 9,300. We know that our study does miss people. There's some hidden homeless population. Sometimes people are staying in cars, other places not meant for human habitation, and so we do some techniques to estimate how many people are homeless on any given night, and we estimate that 15,000 people in Minnesota are homeless on any given night, and we think that's a conservative estimate.

Paul: And how do you define somebody as homeless? What does it take to be in that 15,000 figure?

Michelle: Well, there's a federal definition of homelessness. In fact, there's probably seven federal definitions, but I won't get into the weeds on that, but it's basically people who are living in emergency shelters, or short term transitional housing facilities, or people who are staying outside of the shelter systems in places not meant for human habitation.

Paul: It could be anywhere. In a park, under a bridge, a railroad car, whatever. Are there characteristics of a person who's most likely to be homeless?

Michelle: Well, what we find is the homeless population is very diverse. We have very young people. We have very old people. We have people that come from all kinds of backgrounds. One of the things that our study does is really delve deeply into the characteristics to see some of the things that are most common. One of the things that we find is there's an over-representation of people of color in our homelessness system, and we can talk a little bit more about that. The homeless population is a very young population, which sometimes surprises people. 51% of our homeless population are age 24 and younger. Either youth on their own, or children with their parents. Homeless folks have experienced a variety of trauma in their life. It's very common with this population to have experienced either trauma and abuse, or abuse, in their backgrounds.

Paul: So what you're saying about Minnesota, would that be true nationally too, in terms of roughly the kinds of trends we're seeing in the characteristics of people?

Michelle: Yeah. What happened in Minnesota, as well as nationally, is sort of a leveling off of the homeless population in the early 2000s when the economy was doing really well. In Minnesota, as well as nationally, there was a sharp jump between 2006 and 2009 when the great recession hit, and another jump between 2009 and 2012. Since 2012, we've seen the numbers either leveling up in Minnesota or nationally, or coming down a little bit. But now in Minnesota, they do a one night count in January, and last year they started to see the numbers going up again.

Paul: Any idea internationally or is that not enough for the two apples to oranges?

Michelle: It's a little too apples to oranges. I mean, there is homelessness everywhere obviously, but it's kind of measured differently.

Paul: Are the developing countries maybe similar to us, or you don't really know?

Michelle: I don't really know. Yeah.

Paul: Yeah. So, Senta, we all want to end homelessness. Is that a realistic goal, or won't some amount of homelessness always be with us?

Senta: I absolutely think it's a reasonable goal. You know, I have dedicated pretty much my entire professional career to the issue, and I'm a pretty practical person. I wouldn't dedicate this much of my life to something that I didn't think was completely solvable. One of the things I remind people of a lot when I'm speaking publicly is that homelessness as we know it, homelessness as Michelle just described, has not always been this way. And, if it hasn't always been this way, it of course doesn't have to stay this way. We can trace homelessness as we know it today at this scale, with this many women and children in particular experiencing the problem, to a pretty specific point in our country's economic and political history.

Senta: But, the problem is younger than I am. We only need to set the clock back about 35 years, and homelessness would start to look like it did prior to the early '80s, which was certainly, there were folks there experiencing it. Typically older single men, what you might kind of imagine, but it was pretty rare. It was brief. People weren't homeless for years on end, and when it did happen it was nonrecurring. It was sort of episodic. So, when we talk about ending homelessness here in Minnesota, and actually across the country, that's what we mean. Bringing homelessness back down to a level that it is rare, brief, and nonrecurring.

Paul: Rare, brief and nonrecurring. And you mentioned children. Any special concerns about children or other age groups in the data? And I assume, Senta, that you agreed with all Michelle's facts? With any of them?

Senta: I'd never argue with Michelle's facts.

Paul: Okay. Any special concerns about children or elderly?

Senta: One of the concerns I have, first of all, I think it's an enlightening for people to realize that over half of the folks we're talking about are children or young people...

Paul: Half, ok.

Senta: ... And the majority of those kids are quite young themselves, I believe, right Michelle? I think about half of the kids that you count are under the age of five?

Michelle: For the children that are with their parents, yes. These tend to be very young families with young children.

Senta: Right. I think we also know, again, based on the Wilder Research data, I think experiencing homelessness as a child is one of our largest predictors for whether or not you'll experience it as an adult. So, when I think about what is nearly the majority of people in Minnesota experiencing homelessness being kids, I think about what a wonderful opportunity we have to get a return on our investment. You know, they have their whole life ahead of them, and they can't pull themselves up by their bootstraps. When we think about some of the sometimes myths or stereotypes of the folks we imagine when we think about homelessness, we don't think about a kid. If we did, we'd realize that they can't just go out and get a job.

Paul: Mm-hmm (affirmative). No. Half, that surprises me. And I guess you agree with her fact, too?

Michelle: [laughs] Yeah. For the-

Paul: Or you gave her the fact?

Michelle: ... the children that are with their parents, we counted about 3,300 children. That's 35% of our homeless population, and then the half gets to those youth who are on their own without their parents.

Paul: Sure. Okay. So, you started to get into some causes, Senta. I guess for either of you, what are the causes, if you were to list them, rank them? What produces this 15,000 in Minnesota being homeless?

Michelle: Well, what we find from our data, of course, there is math problems, so that the incomes of folks experiencing homelessness do not match what the fair market rent is, or even if they're subsidized rent, it's difficult for families to make those payments. Right now the vacancy rate in the Twin Cities area is less than 2% for rental housing, and so families on the margins, families experiencing poverty, or homelessness, or other issues are competing for the same rental units as people that don't have those issues. Sometimes they have items on their records, like they might've had a criminal history way back when they were younger that might come up when they're running a criminal background check, which will not allow folks to get housing. So, they experience a lot of barriers to getting into housing itself and there's really not enough housing available.

Paul: So lack of housing, housing costs, those are tied together? Barriers to getting housing, even if it is available, is that it? Is that all the causes or is there something else?

Michelle: Well, it's as complex as our society is, so some folks have experienced significant health problems. For you and I, if we have a health problem and we have our own homes, we kind of stabilize and we can take care of our health issue. But if you are living in rental housing, and your landlord's on your back about your rent, plus you're sick, and you have a health problem, that can cause you to experience homelessness. So there's incomes, there's employment, there's living paycheck to paycheck, but there's also these multiple health issues that folks are experiencing as well.

Paul: Okay. What about structural historical issues? People have experienced racism. There's been historical, maybe over centuries, of trauma for certain populations. How do these fit into the causes?

Michelle: We do really think this is one of the main reason why there is an over-representation of people of color in our homelessness system. For our African American population, 39% of our homeless population is African American, and in Minnesota, only 5% of our population is African American, so there's this huge difference there. For many years, folks who are African American could not get housing because of there was literally laws. There was redlining of banks where they would not allow folks to own in certain areas, or get mortgages. Just different things that got in the way all along the way, so that causes it to be more difficult to get employment. Again, competing for jobs. If there's racism involved they might not be able to get jobs, and so that's a huge issue.

Michelle: For our American Indian population, which is also overrepresented in our homelessness system, 8% of our homeless population's American Indian, and only 1% of Minnesota's population is American Indian. There was the history of the boarding schools where children were taken out of their homes, away from their families, so they didn't grow up at home, and sort of raised by the government, which probably is not the best parent in the world. That caused some issues that lingered over generations for those families as well. So, you know, racism is an issue. There are other structural items in place. It can be difficult for people to access employment, depending on their backgrounds and situations. Senta might have more to say about it, but that's ...

Paul: Well, maybe a shift to a slightly ... I mean, as we start to move a little bit towards solutions and thinking about that and so forth, it seems that the logical cure, in a sense, for lack of a place to live is provide a place to live. But, if we built enough housing units for every homeless person, would that resolve our community's issues, or would we still have some really big issues beyond just enough units to match with people?

Senta: Well, we know that, as I mentioned earlier, with the policy decisions that were made in the early '80s, as we track that 35 plus years later, we know that as public and government investments in affordable housing have declined, the rate of housing and security, and in the most extreme cases homelessness, has skyrocketed. So, I think if we can begin to change the conversation, and in Minnesota we do this fairly well. Our lawmakers have come to understand that affordable housing is a basic infrastructure investment as basic as clean drinking water, bridges that don't collapse, and homes that are affordable to people across the economic spectrum.

Senta: Here in Minnesota, I think we also understand that when we're building these units, we aren't just building four walls and a roof. We're really investing in the people who call those places home. Investments in affordable housing are investments in workers who are earning wages, children who are learning in schools, seniors who are hopefully thriving in their homes. It's not just a bricks and mortar issue.

Paul: Sure. Just to push that a little more though, it sounds like both of you have talked about a whole variety of causes. Some are short term, some are longer. Clearly the lack of affordable housing. The housing costs. Senta, you talked about the children, that maybe the child welfare system, and you know, where kids are is a predictor of where they might be 20 years out as adults. You talked about racism, poverty, even going back to boarding schools and long-term influence. I don't know that either of you mentioned domestic violence, but that clearly would be another cost?

Senta: Yep.

Michelle: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Paul: I mean, given all those causes, is providing four walls and a roof the answer to those problems of our society?

Senta: Michelle nudged at this. I always say, homelessness isn't a character flaw. It's a math problem. The complicating factors that are certainly present in the lives of people experiencing homelessness are real and they exist, but I think the most distinguishing element between them and us, if you will, is their economic security, or perhaps their

social capital too. I know people who can treat an illness, or go and handle a chemical dependency problem, and return to a safe and stable place to call home.

Paul: So that's what you mean by social capital? That somebody has access, connections to other people who can provide them with things they need?

Senta: Or the money.

Paul: Or the money?

Senta: Yeah. Or you make enough money and have health insurance that allows you to go and treat your condition, and it doesn't mean that in the meantime you lose your housing.

Michelle: And one of the things that my colleague Greg Owen always says is that one of the difference between those of us who live paycheck to paycheck and folks who are homeless is friends and family that might take them in when there's a crisis. So, all of us experience crises in our lives, and are there people that can take you in? If you live in a community where a lot of people are experiencing poverty, a lot of people may be experiencing those economic or other crises, they may take you in, but you might not be able to last very long in that situation. And so, that could cause you to end up in a shelter. So, you know, helping to stabilize full communities is also really important in this issue.

Senta: Michelle can correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm not sure that alcoholism or mental health issues are any more prevalent in the populations who are experiencing homelessness, or at least the adults, right, that are experiencing homelessness? Those aren't issues that discriminate by our socioeconomic status, but how our lives are affected certainly does.

Michelle: The way I would correct you is that it seems like in the homeless population, they have multiple issues. Overlapping issues. And that might be one of the things that helps push them into that situation. So, it's not usually just one thing, but a confluence of a bunch of different things coming together that may put them on this edge.

Paul: That confluence is just so overburdening that that might be one of the distinguishing factors for why certain people become homeless but not others. Something called Housing First is a national movement, including in Minnesota. Does that really work? Is that a good approach? Does it have a downside?

Michelle: Well, what Housing First is, just to explain it briefly, and Senta, please correct me if I'm wrong. It's the idea that you have to provide housing first before you can really deal with some of the other issues that someone is experiencing. Many years ago, there were a lot of criteria to accessing housing. You had to maybe pass a background check, or be chemical-free, or pass a breathalyzer test, or have your mental health completely under control and be taking your meds and going to a therapist. Et cetera, et cetera. Now the idea is how can you deal with some of those issues unless you at least have a stable place to live? How can you remember to take your medications every day? How can you remember to go to the therapist?

Paul: So, get people into housing and then do that list of, checklist of things that you said earlier?

Michelle: Exactly. Kind of stabilize people first and then try to decide what are their priorities for what they want to work on first, and kind of deal with it.

Paul: Is there evidence that it works?

Michelle: Well, there's different study ... You know, here I am the researcher, so maybe the ...

Paul: Some studies say yes, some say no, but the jury is still out? Is that what you're telling me?

Michelle: Yes.

Paul: Okay.

Michelle: But the idea that stable housing works is true. That has been shown in the research.

Paul: Pretty well confirmed?

Michelle: Yep. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Paul: With evidence. Okay. Well, maybe as long as we're talking about solutions, we should move into that general topic, but first of all Michelle, Wilder Research does this homelessness study every few years. Why is that important? There's one in 2018?

Michelle: Yes, October 25th, 2018. It's coming right up. We've been doing this study every three years statewide since 1991. We're very unique in the country for having this long trendline of homelessness data, and very in-depth data. The reason why we'll want to continue to doing that is we really want to follow the trends and understand what parts of the population are growing, what parts are decreasing, which policies are working. One of the things that the state, and folks like Senta did a number of years ago, is really focus on our veteran population. They have virtually eliminated veteran homelessness in our state. So, there are solutions that can be addressed when you really understand the population.

Paul: Do you use it, Senta?

Senta: Absolutely. It's one of the most useful and envied resources that we have here in Minnesota. Folks inside the capital use it. Outside the capital. Journalists who are helping to inform the public. It's an invaluable study.

Paul: Great. So Senta, consider the typical person. They don't have the expertise that you have. They don't have the knowledge of the numbers that some of us have. They probably aren't going to have time to read the Wilder Research homelessness study, but maybe they want to do some little thing in their own way. Any community. Minnesota, U.S., whatever. What can they do about homelessness issues? What would be the top thing you would recommend to the average person?

Senta: The very first thing I would say is make your voice heard. Contact your lawmaker. Remind them that an investment in affordable housing isn't just an investment in an apartment unit, but an investment in workers, and kids, and seniors, and communities. Remind them that where we live impacts every single aspect of our lives, where we grocery shop, how we manage our healthcare, where we can work, where our kids go to

school. I have many years of experience in the affordable housing issue, but I'm still relatively new to public policy, and advocacy.

Senta: New enough that I remember what it's like to have never called my lawmaker before, and how intimidating that can be. So one of the things that I've been doing, I've been on the road quite a bit over the past week across Minnesota, kicking off our Homes For All campaign, which is an annual campaign to ensure Minnesota has the resources and policies to end this problem. In 2018, we're making our largest request of the legislature yet, with \$140 million dollars in bonds for housing. We're a statewide coalition. So I've been south, I've been metro, I've been pretty far north.

Senta: And in every event we had one person who had never called their lawmaker before pick up the phone and, right in front of the microphone on speakerphone, dial that number and use the script that we provide to advocates to get that message across. What I can say is that organizing, and advocacy, and lifting your voice works. Minnesota hasn't passed a bonding bill since 2012 that didn't include an investment in affordable housing, and this year will be no different, but since it's our largest request, we'll need more voices than ever before. Having those conversations are, you know ... Try to take the power dynamic out of it.

Paul: Sure. Get people to do it.

Senta: Yeah.

Paul: Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. One last question for each of you, and in an way it builds off of what you were just saying Senta, but now you can ... It's not the average person, but it's the two of you as experts. Assume that there were some resources there to do something, whatever that something is. What is the first thing that each of you would recommend to address homelessness?

Michelle: We're both looking at the other person to go first.

Paul: Maybe something you already said, or maybe a synthesis of some of the conversation we've had, or something totally new, whatever. But, assume you had the resources, what would you do?

Senta: A big part of what I would do is generate the resources. So, you're kind of catching me in a catch-22. You know, closing the gap. Closing that mathematical equation that we talked about. Rents in Minnesota are at a historic high. Vacancies are at a historic low, and low wage jobs aren't keeping up with the cost of housing. That's true in Minnesota, that's true across the country. There's not a single county anywhere in the United States where you can earn minimum wage and afford a market rate one or two bedroom apartment. So, you can't work 40 hours, earn minimum wage, and a pay market rate for even a simple rental unit. Here in Minnesota, I'm spit-balling here, but I think the number, even at our increased minimum wage, is a worker would have to work about 65, 67 hours a week in order to afford that market rate unit. If you're working that often, are you home to help your kids with homework? Are you there to take care of some of those basic parts of your life? So, closing that gap.

Paul: Okay. Michelle?

Michelle: Well, that's a really good question. I think the first thing I would do, just because I have aging parents myself and I'm really thinking about this issue right now, is address the medically fragile older adult community. I feel like we could get them right into stable housing with supports. It's a growing population of our homeless folks. It's a small population. It seems like something that we could solve really quickly.

Paul: Low-hanging fruit in some ways?

Michelle: It does.

Paul: Not implying that it's easy, but at least it would be something that could be solved.

Michelle: Right. And I think people don't always understand that these folks may not be appropriate for a nursing home. They may not have that intensive of care, and that nursing homes are required to find people housing. They cannot release people into homelessness, and so sometimes they won't take medically fragile homeless people. That seems like a doable problem that we could wrap our heads around. Then, the second thing I would do would be to go upstream to kind of do some of the things that Senta's talking about to prevent families from coming into homelessness. Provide more support when people are about to get evicted, maybe legal aid assistance or other help, maybe some short term financial assistance. That already does occur, but the need is far greater than the demand right now.

Paul: Working upstream. Well, thank you very much to both of you for the insights that you provided on this topic of homelessness. Quick question to each of you that has nothing to do with the topic today, but Senta, what's the last movie you saw, and would you recommend it?

Senta: I'm a mom of a 20 month old and a 5 year old, so I think the last movie I saw was Ferdinand, and it was pretty good. Go out and give it a look see.

Paul: Michelle, how about you?

Michelle: I'm a mom of a 19 and a 22 year old. The last movie that I saw was Wonder Woman and it was awesome. Very female empowerment.

Paul: So you'd recommend it? Okay. The last movie I saw a couple of weeks ago was The Post. I think it had lessons very much applicable today, even though it was historical a few decades ago. So, that wraps up this Wilder Research Podcast. Please feel free to go to websites, wilderresearch.org, or mnhomelesscoalition.org. Thanks again to our guests, Senta Leff, Executive Director of the Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless, and Michelle Gerrard, Senior Research Manager at Wilder Research. And, if you in listening to this podcast have any comments, suggestions, ideas, go to the website. You'll see ways to contact us. Send them along. Look at the kinds of topics we cover there, and maybe we'll do a podcast on your favorite topic.

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