

Homelessness in rural Minnesota

Fact sheet: Minnesota statewide homeless study, 2006

About the study

Minnesota is the only state in the nation that routinely gathers information about rural homelessness. Since 1984, Wilder Research has conducted surveys of persons experiencing homelessness. Surveys conducted in 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988, and 1990 focused on the Twin Cities metropolitan area only. With additional funding from public and private sources, Wilder expanded the survey statewide. Beginning in 1991, the survey has been conducted every three years during the last week in October.

The proportion of homeless adults and children interviewed outside of the Twin Cities metropolitan area has remained relatively stable across the 15 years during which the study has been conducted. One-quarter to one-third of the state's homeless population has been interviewed in greater Minnesota each time. The 2006 study identified 2,349 men, women, youth, and children in greater Minnesota on a single night in late October.

Rural homeless often migrate to the metro area

Greater Minnesota includes both large and small communities, only some of which can be defined as rural. In the 2006 statewide survey there were 576 homeless adults whose last permanent housing was in a town of fewer than 25,000 people outside of the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area, and who were still in greater Minnesota at the time of the survey.

The larger story of rural homelessness also includes 48 unaccompanied youth (17 or younger and on their own) from small towns who were interviewed in greater Minnesota, as well as 135 adults and 3 youth

who were last housed in small non-metro towns but were interviewed in metropolitan locations. There were also 317 adults and 22 youth whose last housing was in larger towns in greater Minnesota, and who were still in greater Minnesota at the time of the survey.

Over time, if people remain homeless, more and more of them gravitate to the metro area. The table below shows the percentage of adults from small rural towns who had migrated to the metro area, by the length of time since they had lost their housing:

Length of homelessness, for people whose last housing was in small towns in greater Minnesota	Percent surveyed in metro area
Less than 1 month (N=93)	11%
1 to 6 months (N=271)	15%
7 to 11 months (N=82)	20%
1 to 2 years (N=167)	23%
3 years or longer (N=89)	33%

The remainder of this fact sheet focuses only on the 576 adults who were still in greater Minnesota when they were surveyed. Unless otherwise stated, the percentages cited for the rural homeless are similar to those for homeless adults in larger communities.

Background characteristics

It is noteworthy that while rural Minnesota communities are much less diverse than metro area communities, a full quarter of rural homeless adults are American Indians (17%), African Americans (2%), and persons of other or mixed races (6%).

With regard to education, 76 percent of the homeless from rural communities have no more than a high school education. Rural homeless adults are slightly more likely than their urban counterparts to report that they were in special education classes while in school (31% compared to 24%).

A higher proportion of rural homeless are women than in larger communities (56% vs. 48%). Forty-three percent of rural homeless have ever been married, although only 8 percent are currently married and not married and not separated. However, 17 percent are currently living with a partner, compared to 7 percent of those from larger communities.

Housing history

Types of shelter arrangements

While the majority of rural homeless are staying in emergency or transitional housing programs (58%), a significant minority are in informal shelter settings (25%) or entirely unsheltered (13%). The remaining 4 percent are in battered women's shelters or safe homes.

As might be expected in rural communities, the proportion of homeless adults staying in temporary arrangements instead of shelter programs is twice the rate found among metro area homeless (25% vs. 11%), and fewer rural homeless are in formal shelter programs (58% vs. 70%).

Experiences in out-of-home placements

As is common among homeless adults and youth statewide, many homeless adults from small towns were placed outside of their homes during childhood, including foster care (20%), group homes (15%), drug or alcohol treatment (9%), mental health treatment (8%), or juvenile detention (21%).

As adults, rural homeless are less likely than their urban counterparts to have spent time in a county jail (35% vs. 40%) or in a state or federal prison (9% vs. 16%).

Homeless adults from rural communities are less likely to have been homeless for a year or longer compared to those from larger home towns (33% compared to 49%).

Rural homeless are less likely than urban homeless to report being turned away from a shelter due to lack of bed spaces in the previous three months (15% vs. 20%). However, for those who had found

the shelters too full to admit them, homeless adults from rural communities were much more likely to report finding temporary arrangements with a friend or family member (41% vs. 27%), in a church (9% vs. 3%), or in a car or abandoned building (15% vs. 11%), but less likely to end up sleeping either in another formal shelter (18% vs. 23%) or outdoors (11% vs. 27%).

Housing affordability and loss of income are primary reasons for losing housing

Both rural and urban homeless adults give similar reasons for their loss of housing. More than a third in both groups report that they simply could not afford the rent or house payments in their previous dwelling. In addition, a quarter of rural homeless and a third of urban homeless report that they could not keep their last housing because they lost their job or had their hours cut. Nearly a third of rural homeless, and just under a quarter of urban homeless, lost their housing when they broke up with a spouse or partner.

Importantly, one out of six homeless adults, both rural and urban, report that they had to leave their last housing because of abuse by someone they lived with. This is most common for women, with more than one-quarter reporting this reason for losing their housing.

Rural homeless adults report that the three biggest current barriers to getting housing are:

- Lack of a job or income (61%)
- No housing they can afford (48%)
- Credit problems (26%)

These are the same top three barriers reported by urban homeless adults.

Service use differs slightly for rural and urban homeless

Rural homeless adults are more often receiving benefits from mainstream public programs, but less often access services more specifically designed for the homeless.

Rural homeless adults were more likely to report that during the previous 12 months they had used WIC (Women, Infant and Children food program) (26% vs. 13%), Food Stamps (64% vs. 58%), or the Earned Income Tax Credit (13% vs. 7%). In the most recent month, rural homeless were also more likely than their counterparts in larger communities to use food shelves (41% vs. 29%).

However, other programs, more accessible in a larger city, are much less widely used by rural homeless including transportation assistance, community voice mail, free clothing shelves, free health clinics, drop-in centers, as well as hot meal programs.

Fewer rural area homeless adults report that they need assistance to apply or reapply for services or benefits (19% vs. 28%).

Rural homeless more likely to be working

Homeless adults in rural communities are more likely than their urban counterparts to report that their main source of income is from steady employment (27% vs. 19%).

Thirty-four percent of rural homeless adults report that they are employed compared to 27 percent of all urban homeless adults. In fact, rural homeless adults report slightly more total income available during October 2006 than urban homeless adults (\$523 compared to \$495).

However, those who are working tend to receive lower wages than in urban areas (59% receive less than \$8.00 per hour, compared to 39% of those in larger communities who are working).

Substantial health-related needs

Forty-five percent of homeless adults from small communities report that they need to see a dentist about tooth or gum problems (vs. 58% of urban homeless). Thirty-six percent report that they need to see a doctor or other health professional about

physical health problems and 38 percent report a need to see a health professional about emotional or mental health problems. Eight percent report a need to see health professional about alcohol or drug-related problems (vs. 15% of urban homeless). About one-third (36%) of rural homeless adults report one or more barriers to getting needed health care. This is higher than the 28 percent of urban adults reporting barriers, with the difference accounted for by the greater numbers of rural homeless reporting problems with transportation.

Thirty-seven percent of rural homeless compared to 45 percent of urban homeless report that they have a chronic health condition (most often high blood pressure, asthma or other chronic respiratory problems, and diabetes). The proportion of the rural homeless who report a significant or long-term mental illness is the same as among their urban counterparts (53% vs. 54%), while the percent who consider themselves alcoholic or chemically dependent is lower (28% vs. 38%).

Violence and maltreatment

Thirty-five percent of rural homeless adults report that they have stayed in an abusive situation because they did not have other housing options. However, fewer rural homeless report having been assaulted while homeless (12% vs. 20%). Forty-three percent of homeless adults in rural communities report either physical or sexual mistreatment as children.

Children

Forty-three percent of rural homeless adults, but only 27 percent of those from larger communities, report that they have children who are living with them.

Sixteen percent of rural adults who have children with them report that at least one of their children has a severe emotional or behavioral health problem (vs. 25% of urban parents) and 9 percent report a severe physical health problem. Only 5 percent of rural parents report having difficulty obtaining needed physical health care for their children in the past year. However, 19 percent report problems getting needed dental care for their children in the past year, slightly higher than the 12 percent of urban parents.

Forty-five percent of rural homeless parents report that one or more of their school-age children has a learning or school problem. Twenty-three percent of homeless rural parents report that a child has repeated at least one grade in school (vs. 17% of urban parents).

More rural parents report that their children are still attending the same school as before they lost their housing (67% vs. 49%), but rural homeless children are about equally likely to have attended school on the day of the survey (with 88% vs. 91% of parents reporting all their children attending that day).

Summary

The results show that there are significant differences between urban and rural homelessness. In particular, the lack of available shelters and services makes it more difficult for rural homeless adults to identify appropriate housing solutions. It is not surprising that people from small towns are more likely to migrate to the Twin Cities metropolitan area the longer they have been without a home.

Because geographical dispersion makes it more expensive to serve rural homeless people, it is unlikely that a significant number of new shelters or temporary housing programs will be built. However, the current results show that it is important to develop additional affordable housing options in rural areas and to attend to the needs of rural poor especially in ways that can help them reduce debt, repair credit, and find employment at a livable wage.

Longer term supportive housing is also needed to address the needs of those with multiple disabilities, and more help is needed for youth coming out of foster care and treatment facilities to reunite successfully with their families, or find alternative safe and stable housing if families are unable to provide it to them.

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the 2006 *Minnesota statewide survey of persons without permanent shelter*. For more information about this report, consult the Wilder Research web site at www.wilderresearch.org, or contact Greg Owen at Wilder Research, 651-647-4600.

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NOVEMBER 2007