CHAPTER 2 NSHAPC DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

Highlights

- The National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC) is based on a statistical sample designed to represent the entire United States. The sample includes 76 primary sampling areas: the country's 28 largest metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs), another 24 randomly sampled small and medium-sized MSAs, and 24 randomly sampled groups of rural counties or parts of counties.
- NSHAPC involved two major phases: surveying administrators of homeless assistance programs through telephone interviews and mail surveys, and conducting face-to-face interviews with the clients of these programs.
- Telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of about 6,300 service locations representing about 12,000 programs. This was followed by a mail survey of about 6,000 programs identified through the telephone interviews. Finally, to reach clients the study randomly selected programs within the primary sampling areas, and from these programs randomly selected about 4,200 program clients who completed in-person interviews.
- NSHAPC covers 16 types of homeless assistance programs, including emergency shelters, transitional housing, permanent housing for the formerly homeless, programs offering vouchers for temporary housing, programs accepting vouchers for temporary housing, food pantries (in all areas for programs, but only in rural areas for client interviews), soup kitchens/meal distribution programs, mobile food programs, physical health care programs, mental health care programs, alcohol/drug programs, HIV/AIDS programs, outreach programs, drop-in centers, and migrant housing used for homeless people.
- This study interviewed a random sample of people who use homeless assistance programs.¹ Many were not homeless at the time of the interview. Some had been homeless at some earlier point in their lives, while others had never been homeless. In addition, although NSHAPC is nationally representative, it does *not* represent homeless

¹ Several types of programs were not included in the client interviewing phase if they were not expected to add significantly to the coverage of homeless people (that is, the people expected at these programs were mostly the same people who were expected to use the remaining programs). The excluded programs were programs accepting vouchers for emergency housing, the four types of health programs, migrant housing used for homeless people, outreach programs if they were outreach *to* a program already included (e.g., an SSI worker coming to a shelter), and most types of "other" programs.

people who do not use services or those in communities that have few or no homeless assistance services. These areas may have homeless people but because the NSHAPC sample is service based, they would have no opportunity to be included in NSHAPC.

• All numbers and simple percentages presented in the text have a 90 percent confidence interval (margin of error) less than or equal to 4 percentage points unless otherwise noted. All comparisons presented in the text are statistically significant at a 90 percent level or better ($p \le .10$).

THE DESIGN OF NSHAPC²

The National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC) is based on a nationally representative sample of 76 metropolitan and nonmetropolitan primary sampling areas. The 28 largest metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) in the country were all included in the survey. Of the remaining 48 sampling areas, 24 were randomly selected from medium and small metropolitan areas, and another 24 were randomly selected groups of nonmetropolitan counties. In New England, groups of smaller administrative units (MCDs) within counties were sampled rather than the counties themselves. A list of the 76 areas included in the survey is provided in Appendix A of this report.

DATA COLLECTION

The NSHAPC study had two phases, data collection from homeless assistance programs, and data collection from clients who use these programs.

Data Collection from Programs

Definitions-Service Locations, Programs, Services, and Clients. NSHAPC telephone interviewing procedures identified *service locations* at which one or more *programs* operated. These *programs* offered *services* to *clients*. The following definitions of these terms were used in developing the provider list and screening programs for inclusion in NSHAPC.

• A *service location* is the physical location at which one or more programs operate.

² For a detailed description of study design and procedures, see Steven Tourkin and David Hubble, "National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients: Data Collection Methods," included as Appendix C of this report. Information about weighting procedures for data analysis may be found in Appendix D. All NSHAPC data collection instruments are reproduced in Appendix E.

• A *program* is a set of services offered to the same group of people at a single location. NSHAPC covered 16 types of programs serving homeless persons (Appendix B provides detailed descriptions). To be considered a program, a provider had to offer services or assistance that were (1) managed or administered by the agency (i.e., the agency provides the staff and funding); (2) designed to accomplish a particular mission or goal; (3) offered on an ongoing basis; (4) focused on homeless persons as an intended population (although not always the only population); and (5) not limited to referrals or administrative functions.

This definition of "program" was used in metropolitan areas. However, because rural areas often lack homeless-specific services, the definition was expanded in rural areas to include agencies serving some homeless people even if this was not a focus of the agency. About one-fourth of the rural programs in NSHAPC were included as a result of this expanded definition.

- A *service* is any good or activity offered to people using a *program*, but not qualifying on its own as a *program*. Examples include food, help locating housing, counseling, childhood immunizations, and many more. For example, HIV testing offered to anyone staying at an emergency shelter or anyone using a particular health program is a *service* of the emergency shelter or the health program but is not a program in its own right for NSHAPC purposes.
- A *client* is someone who uses a *program*, whether or not he or she is homeless. Interviews were conducted with clients of any age as long as they were *not* accompanied by a parent or guardian. Virtually all clients interviewed were adults (1 percent were younger than 18).

Telephone Interviews with Representatives of Service Locations. The study's first phase, conducted between October 1995 and October 1996, involved telephone contacts with potential homeless assistance providers, telephone interviews with those who were validated as operating homeless assistance programs, and a mail survey of each homeless assistance program identified through the telephone interviews. Respondents were program directors or other knowledgeable staff. The study gathered data about 16 different types of homeless assistance programs and about the service locations and agencies that offered them. Staff at service location offering one or more homeless assistance program and its clients. These efforts resulted in completed interviews with the representatives of 6,307 service locations. Staff interviewed at these locations reported operating 11,983 programs where services for homeless people were a focus of their activity.

Mail Surveys to Homeless Assistance Programs. A mail survey asking for detailed program information was sent to each of the approximately 10,400 programs identified through the telephone survey up to the point when surveys were distributed in April 1996. If the provider responding to the telephone survey operated three programs at its service location, program directors or other knowledgeable persons received three mail surveys. Surveys from 6,457 inscope programs were completed and returned, yielding 5,694 valid programs for analysis. About 1,100 surveys went to programs that were out-of-scope because they had closed, did not operate at the time of the survey, were the same as another program, turned out not to meet the NSHAPC definition of a program, or other reasons. The mail survey response rate for in-scope programs was about 70 percent. The mail survey asked respondents about the needs of their clients for 59 distinct services, their service use, and the source of service. It also asked shelter and housing programs about their capacity, occupancy levels, reasons for being less than full, transportation services, and destinations of clients upon leaving their program.

Surveying Clients of Homeless Assistance Programs

The second phase of NSHAPC, the client survey, was conducted over a four-week period from October 18 through November 14, 1996. It included interviews with a sample of 4,207 clients of emergency shelters, soup kitchens, outreach programs, and other programs offering services or assistance to homeless persons (the client response rate was 96 percent). During the client interviewing phase, six to eight clients were interviewed at each of approximately 700 program visits.

A variety of client sampling methods were developed because clients could flow through the program in different ways when receiving services. In general, however, a complete listing of clients was made and random samples drawn. Once a client was identified for interview and the survey explained to him or her, a full interview lasting about 45 minutes took place. After completing the interview, clients were paid \$10 for their cooperation. For outreach, mobile food, and other programs contacting clients in the evening or at night, if interviewing was not feasible at the time of contact, sampled clients were given appointment cards and asked to appear at designated locations the following morning. This procedure worked extremely well.

Findings from the client survey are reported for the 4,133 clients who were interviewed in programs meeting the study's core definition of a homeless assistance program.³ Findings reveal the characteristics of the portion of the homeless population that uses services, identify population subgroups, and help determine their use of various types of homeless assistance programs. The NSHAPC client survey also provides limited data on housed persons with very low incomes who rely on soup kitchens and other programs offering emergency assistance. Data

³ The remaining 74 clients were interviewed at programs in rural areas meeting a relaxed definition of a homeless assistance program. Information about these clients can be found in the appendix to chapter 13 of this report.

from the client survey support examination of client characteristics at the national level and for central cities, parts of metropolitan areas outside of central cities, and nonmetropolitan areas. However, the sample size is not large enough to produce estimates of client characteristics for each local area that was included in the data collection.

BASIC ANALYTIC CATEGORIES

Three important client subgroups are used throughout this report and need to be defined for the reader. These are homelessness status, family status, and alcohol/drug/ mental health (ADM) status. In addition, the time referents for "past week," "past month," "lifetime," and other time periods are clarified. Also described is the geographic basis for the terms central city, suburbs/urban fringe, and rural, which are the three categories of the variable "urban/rural location," and the time frames used throughout the report.

Defining Homelessness Status

The study adopted the same definition of "homeless" as that used in the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, namely an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, or an individual who has a primary night-time residence that is: (a) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill); (b) a public or private place that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or (c) public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, regular sleeping accommodations for human beings.

The following specific conditions were used to classify NSHAPC clients as *currently homeless*:

- The client reported staying in any of the following places on the day of the survey or during the seven-day period prior to being interviewed for NSHAPC:
 - 1. An emergency shelter or transitional housing program, or
 - 2. A hotel or motel paid for by a shelter voucher, or
 - 3. An abandoned building, a place of business, a car or other vehicle, or anywhere outside.
- Or clients:
 - 4. Reported that the last time they had "a place of [their] own for 30 days or more in the same place" was more than seven days ago, or
 - 5. Said their last period of homelessness ended within the last seven days, or
 - 6. Were selected for inclusion in the NSHAPC client survey at an emergency shelter or transitional housing program (clients sampled from a voucher distribution program were only classified as currently homeless if they also reported some other indicator of current homelessness), or

- 7. Reported getting food from "the shelter where you live" within the last seven days, or
- 8. On the day of the interview, said they stayed in their own or someone else's place but that they "could not sleep there for the next month without being asked to leave."

Use of the first criterion (shelter use) classifies 34.9 percent of the sample as currently homeless (table 2.1). Criteria two (voucher use) and three (places not meant for habitation) add 1.7 percent and 9.8 percent, respectively, for a total of 46.4 percent. The five remaining criteria together add another 7.1 percent, for a final total of 53.5 percent of the sample classified as currently homeless. All but the final criterion meet the McKinney Act definition of homelessness; the last criterion adds only 0.3 percentage points to the final proportion classified as currently homeless, and was included because the survey itself treats clients in this situation as homeless.

Many clients who were not literally homeless reported having been homeless at some earlier time in their lives (22 percent of the full sample). The circumstances used to classify clients as formerly homeless also meet the McKinney Act definition of homelessness. Clients were classified as *formerly homeless* if they

- did not meet any of the conditions qualifying them as currently homeless but reported that at some point in their lives they had stayed in any of the following:
 - 1. an emergency or transitional shelter, or
 - 2. a welfare/voucher hotel, or
 - 3. an abandoned building, a place of business, a car/other vehicle, or anywhere outside, or
 - 4. a permanent housing program for the formerly homeless, or
- Said they had previously had a period when they were homeless.

The remaining 24 percent of NSHAPC clients had never been homeless according to the criteria used here, and also said they had never been homeless. They are referred to throughout this report as *other service users*. Throughout this report, tables presenting information by homeless status include a column for other service users, but, because other service users of different ages have very different characteristics, two additional columns are provided splitting this group into those age 64 and younger, and those age 65 and older. Detailed textual discussion focuses on the two groups of other service users categorized by age, and not to the group as a whole. The tables provide the data to allow readers who wish to do so to look at the group as a whole.

Table 2.1								
Situations Used to Classify NSHAPC Clients As Homeless								

Housing Situation or Other Homeless Criterion	Percent of Clients in Each Situation	Marginal Increase Due to Each Additional Criterion
Said they stayed in an emergency shelter or transitional housing on the day of the survey or during the seven-day period prior to being interviewed for NSHAPC.	34.9	34.9
Said they stayed in a hotel paid for with a shelter voucher on the day of the survey or during the seven-day period prior to being interviewed for NSHAPC.	2.2	1.7
Said they stayed in an abandoned building, a place of business, a car or other vehicle, and anywhere outside on the day of the survey or during the seven-day period prior to being interviewed for NSHAPC	16.9	9.8
Said that the last time they had "a place of [their] own for 30 days or more in the same place" was more than seven days ago.	45.6	3.2
Said their last period of homelessness ended within the last seven days.	0.1	0.0
Did not say any of above, but were sampled for NSHAPC at an emergency or transitional shelter.	28.4	3.4
Said they got food from "the shelter where you live" within the last seven days.	18.1	0.2
On the day of the interview, was staying in their own or someone else's place but said "no" to the question "can you sleep there for the next month without being asked to leave."	2.3	0.3
Total		53.5

Note: All criteria but the last meet the McKinney Act definition of homelessness. The final criterion was included because the NSHAPC survey treats clients in this situation as homeless. It adds only 0.3 percentage points to the proportion of clients classified in this study as currently homeless.

Specifying Time Frames

All time periods referred to in this report are in relation to the day a client was interviewed for the study (between October 18 and November 14, 1996). Thus "past week" or "past seven days" refers to the week before the interview; "past month" or "past 30 days" refers to the month before the interview; and "past year" refers to the year before the interview. "Lifetime" refers to the client's life up to the time of the interview.

Defining Family and Single Status

In this report a client is considered to be in a *family household* if he or she lives with one or more of his or her own children under age 18. For the sake of simplicity throughout the report, these clients will be referred to as clients "clients in families." It is not possible to determine who else might be members of these families, nor is it possible to say with certainty that a client is alone. However, it is clear when none of the client's children live with them, and that most clients are not married. Therefore, for simplicity of language, the family status variable reported throughout this study classifies clients into two mutually exclusive groups: *clients in families* and *single clients*.

Defining Alcohol/Drug/Mental Health Status

For purposes of analyses common to Chapters 3 through 13, individuals are classified as having an ADM problem if they have had at least one alcohol use, drug use, or mental health problem during the past month. This variable, past-month ADM status, is the basis of the standard breaks found in appendix tables for the remaining chapters presenting analyses of client data. Other analyses also present information based on past-year or lifetime ADM problems, as defined below. Presence of each problem is defined as follows.

Clients are classified as having a *past month alcohol use problem* if *any* of the following conditions are met: (1) they score 0.17 or higher on a modified Addiction Severity Index⁴ (ASI) measure, (2) they report drinking to get drunk three or more times a week within the past month, (3) they report being treated for alcohol abuse within the past month, or (4) they report ever having been treated for alcohol abuse *and* drinking three or more times a week within the past month. Clients are classified as having a *past year alcohol use problem* if they meet these same criteria within the past (including the past month), and as having a *lifetime alcohol use problem* if they meet these same criteria in

⁴ The Addiction Severity Index is an instrument developed by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (Fureman, Parikh, Bragg, and McLellan, 1990). It contains subscales to measure a client's level of problems with alcohol, with drugs, and with mental or emotional problems. Cutoff levels used in this report are slight modifications of the means reported in Zanis, McLellan, Cnaan, and Randall (1994).

their lifetime or if they report ever having had three or more alcohol-related difficulties such as blackouts, tremors, and/or convulsions.

Clients are classified as having a *past month drug use problem* if *any* of the following conditions are met: (1) they score 0.10 or higher on a modified ASI measure, (2) they report being treated for drug abuse within the past month, (3) they report using drugs intravenously (shooting up),⁵ or (4) they report using any of a variety of specific drugs three or more times a week within the past month.⁶ Clients are classified as having a *past year drug use problem* if they meet these same criteria within the past year (including the past month), and as having a *lifetime drug use problem* if they meet these or more drug-related problems such as blackouts, convulsions, withdrawal symptoms, or engaging in illegal activities to get money for drugs at some time in their lives.

Clients are classified as having a *past month mental health problem* if *any* of the following conditions are met: (1) they score 0.25 or higher on a modified Addiction Severity Index (ASI) measure, (2) they report receiving treatment or counseling or being hospitalized for emotional or mental problems within the past month, (3) they report on the ASI taking prescribed medications for psychological or emotional problems within the past month, (4) they report that a mental health condition is the single most important thing keeping them from getting out of homelessness, or (5) they report receiving treatment or counseling or being hospitalized for emotional or more of the ASI's seven emotional or psychological conditions within the past month.⁷ Clients are classified as having a *past year mental health problem* if they meet these same criteria within the past year (including the past month), and as having a *lifetime mental health problem* if they meet these same criteria in their lifetime or if they report ever having stayed in an adult group home, crisis residence, or other housing for the mentally ill.

Describing Urban/Rural Location

A number of analyses focus on the geographic location where clients were found, including central cities, suburban and urban fringe areas, and rural areas. *Central cities* are the main or primary cities of metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs). *Suburban and urban fringe areas* are

⁵ This item is part of Question 10.1 of the client survey, that asked about current medical conditions.

⁶ See chapter 8 and/or Question 13.14 of the client survey (appendix E) for a list of these drugs.

⁷ The eighth ASI item, "taking prescribed medications for psychological or emotional problems," is a criterion in its own right (criterion 3, above) for clasifying a client as having a mental health problem. See Chapter 8 and/or Question 12.1 of the client survey (appendix E) for a list of these emotional and psychological conditions.

defined as what is left of MSAs after taking out the central cities, and may include smaller cities, suburbs, towns, and even open land if it is in the counties making up the MSA. *Rural areas* are defined as all areas outside of MSAs, and may include small cities (under 50,000), towns, villages, and open land.

WEIGHTING

All data reported in the following chapters has been weighted to be nationally representative. Information describing programs and service locations is weighted to be nationally representative of *homeless assistance programs and service locations on an average day in February 1996.*

All data describing client characteristics has been weighted to be nationally representative of *clients of homeless assistance programs during an average WEEK from October 18 through November 14, 1996*; that is, the week before the client was interviewed. The client weights have been constructed to assure that a person is not double-counted even if she or he used several homeless assistance programs during the course of that seven-day period. The seven-day period was selected as the most appropriate for several reasons. First, it takes advantage of the program use data collected from clients about this period. In doing so, it assures that no single day of idiosyncratic program use exercises an undue influence on the weight. Second, it recognizes and compensates for the fact that some people who are homeless on a given day might not be represented if they do not use a program on that day, but are more likely to be represented if a longer time frame is used. One does not want to underrepresent homeless clients or any other clients who use services infrequently. Finally, it parallels the practice of using a seven-day weight first reported with respect to the 1987 Urban Institute study (Burt and Cohen, 1989). Weighting is further described in Appendix D.

TREATMENT OF STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Confidence Intervals

A 90 percent criterion has been used for confidence intervals this report.

- For numbers: 90 percent confidence intervals are given for all estimates of numbers. A 90 percent confidence interval of \pm 400 means that if the reported number of soup kitchens is 4,000, 4,000 is the estimate of the number of soup kitchens and the probability is 90 percent that the number falls between 3,600 and 4,400.
- For percentages: Almost all simple percentages reported in the text have a 90 percent confidence interval of no more than ± 4 percentage points. A 90 percent confidence interval of ± 4 percentage points means that if the reported percent is 60, 60 is the estimate and the probability is 90 percent that the percent falls between 56 and 64

percent. In the few instances when the confidence interval exceeds ± 4 percentage points, the actual confidence interval is reported in a footnote with the following notation: 90% C.I. = X percentage points.

Statistical Significance of Comparisons

Comparisons are the other important way that information is presented in this report. When one reports that currently homeless clients include higher proportions of men than do formerly homeless clients, one is making a comparison. A statistical test is used to determine whether the difference between two percentages from different groups is "significant" in the statistical sense. As with confidence intervals, these tests can be calculated for different levels of statistical significance.

A 90 percent criterion has been used for all comparisons in this report. Thus, all comparisons discussed in the text are statistically significant at p = .10 or better, meaning that there is only a 10 percent chance that the difference is *not* a true difference.

Design Effect Used for Statistical Tests

The sampling error from the survey, measured by the "sampling variance," is higher than the variance given in textbook formulas for a simple random sample with the same sample size because of the various complexities of the sample design. This increase in variance is summarized in the "design effect," which gives the ratio between the NSHAPC variance and the variance from the textbook formula for a simple random sample of the same size. For both the provider and client samples, a design effect of 3.0 has been used; that is, the NSHAPC variance is about three times as large as the usual formula.

For the provider estimates, this higher variance occurs for several reasons (1) a two-stage sample was used, first selecing a sample of counties and then selecting a sample of providers within counties; (2) the providers vary in size and there was no exact measure of their size when we selected the sample; and (3) the Census Bureau sampled for nonresponse follow-up instead of doing a complete follow-up. For the client sample, the main effects that increase the variance are (1) the fact that only a sample of counties is used; (2) the clustering of sample clients from selected providers on selected days of the month and at selected time intervals. Census Bureau statisticians estimated the magnitude of the design effect indirectly, based on experience with design effects for other surveys with similar designs and similar numbers of counties and clustering within counties.

Risk of False Positives

The reader should note that when one conducts a very large number of statistical significance tests, some of them are going to produce false positives, meaning that a difference between two numbers really is *not* significant although the test says it is. Thousands of tests for statistical significance were performed on the data contained in this report. The reader is cautioned not to make too much of statistically significant but relatively small differences between populations. Rather, attention is best directed to serious or sizable differences between populations that are most likely to be stable and reliable, and also may have a chance to be important for policy purposes.

WHERE CLIENTS WERE IDENTIFIED FOR INTERVIEW, BY FRAME, HOMELESS STATUS, AND URBAN/RURAL LOCATION

Some readers may wish to know the proportion of clients selected into the sample from different types of programs. It may be especially helpful to have this information separately for currently and formerly homeless clients and other service users, and also by the type of community where they were found; table 2.2 presents the relevant statistics.

Each of the 11 NSAHPC program types included in the client data collection was its own sampling frame. These program types comprise the rows in table 2.2. Three factors affect the distributions shown in the table: (1) how homeless status was defined, (2) the availability of particular types of programs in communities of different types, and (3) the use of the food pantry frame only in rural areas. By definition, no one classified as formerly homeless or as an other service user was found in the emergency shelter or transitional housing sampling frames. As a consequence, higher proportions of formerly homeless clients and other service users, compared to currently homeless clients, were selected for the sample from soup kitchens, since they could not, by definition, have been selected from the emergency shelter or transitional housing frames. The use of food pantries as a frame in rural areas also changes the distribution in those areas toward food pantries. Also note the relatively high level of rural homeless clients found in the voucher distribution frame, reflecting the possibility that in these communities, vouchers may represent a more economical approach than permanent shelters to providing emergency housing. Finally, note that some clients designated as other service users were found in the permanent housing frame, and that some clients designated as formerly homeless and other service users were found in the voucher distribution frame. Because some uncertainty existed as to the nature of some permanent housing and voucher distribution programs included in these frames (i.e., whether they were permanent housing programs for formerly homeless persons, voucher distribution programs for currently homeless persons, or were regular public housing and/or voucher distribution programs), being found in these two frames was not made a criterion for classifying someone as currently or formerly homeless if there were no other indications that they had ever experienced a homeless episode.

	Currently Homeless				Formerly Homeless				Other Service Users			
Program	Central				Central				Central			
Туре	City	Suburb	Rural	Total	City	Suburb	Rural	Total	City	Suburb	Rural	Total
Emergency Shelters	22	32	62	28	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Transitional Housing	25	36	7	25	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Permanent Housing	7	2	0	5	36	19	1	26	12	3	*	5
Voucher Distribution	*	2	1	*	0	2	5	1	2	0	3	2
Soup Kitchens	33	15	3	26	45	42	23	40	63	62	10	41
Food Pantries	Inap	Inap	14	1	Inap	Inap	64	12	Inap	Inap	71	29
Mobile Food	1	3	0	1	1	7	*	2	1	14	4	5
Outreach	8	9	9	8	8	18	1	8	14	11	5	10
Drop-In	5	3	4	4	9	12	6	9	8	10	7	8
Other	1	0	0	*	*	0	0	*	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

 Table 2.2

 Type of Program In Which Clients Were Selected to Participate in NSHAPC, by Homeless Status and Urban/Rural Location

Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data. * Denotes values that are less than 0.5 but greater than 0. Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding.