

## CHAPTER 13

### COMPARING HOMELESS CLIENTS FROM CENTRAL CITY, SUBURBAN, AND RURAL AREAS

#### *Highlights: Homeless Clients by Urban/Rural Location*<sup>1</sup>

- Among all homeless clients, 71 percent were identified for interview in central cities, 21 percent in suburban areas, and 9 percent in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> This distribution is quite different from the distribution of all poor Americans, of whom 43 percent live in central cities, 34 percent in suburban and urban fringe areas, and 23 percent in rural areas.
- Compared to clients from other areas, homeless suburban clients as a group are more female. Homeless rural clients, include greater shares of Native Americans, clients aged 35 to 44, and high school drop-outs, and smaller shares of black non-Hispanic clients.
- A larger proportion of central city clients (21 percent) report staying in places not meant for habitation than is true for suburban clients (12 percent).
- Clients from central cities are more likely than those from suburban/urban fringe and rural areas to have used a soup kitchen (68 percent, 50 percent, and 45 percent, respectively) and a drop-in center in their lifetime (30 percent, 18 percent, and 14 percent, respectively). Rural and suburban/urban fringe clients do not differ in their use of these programs. The availability of these programs outside of central cities probably affects these results.
- Central city clients are considerably poorer than other homeless clients. Clients' median income is \$250 in central cities, \$395 in suburban areas, and \$475 in rural areas. Also, 15 percent of central city clients report no income over the last 30 days compared to only 6 to 7 percent of other clients.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless noted specifically in the text, all comparisons are statistically significant at  $p = .10$  or better, and all percentages presented by themselves have a 90 percent confidence interval no larger than  $\pm 6$  percentage points for statistics pertaining to central cities and  $\pm 10$  percentage points for statistics pertaining to suburban and rural areas. A confidence interval of  $\pm 6$  percentage points means that if the reported percent is 60, 60 is the estimate of the value and the probability is 90 percent that the value falls between 54 and 66 percent. Confidence intervals greater than  $\pm 8$  percentage points will be noted in a footnote as: 90% C.I. =  $\pm X$  percentage points.

<sup>2</sup> None of the data reported in this or in any other chapter of this report includes clients interviewed in rural areas at programs that were included only under the expanded or relaxed definition of a "homeless assistance program." See the appendix to this chapter for more information about the clients who *were* interviewed in these "expanded definition" programs.

- Rural clients have less access to medical care. 47 percent of rural clients report they needed to see a doctor or nurse in the last year but were not able to do so, compared to 22 percent of other homeless clients.
- Equal proportions (64 to 67<sup>3</sup> percent) of central city, suburban, and rural clients have an alcohol, drug, or mental health problem in the past month.
- 33 percent of suburban clients, 24 percent of those from central cities, and 12 percent of those from rural areas report being physically or sexually abused before the age of 18. Incarceration follows the opposite pattern: 64<sup>2</sup> percent of homeless clients from rural areas have spent time in juvenile detention, jail, or state or federal prison compared to 55 percent of those from central cities and 44 percent from suburban areas.

## INTRODUCTION

Most studies of homeless populations focus on urban areas or, even more specifically, on central cities or downtown areas. Yet many homeless people live outside of these major urban centers, and significant levels of service for homeless people may be found there.<sup>4</sup> NSHAPC presents a unique opportunity to describe homeless and other users of homeless assistance programs throughout the United States, and to examine similarities and differences among service-using homeless populations in central cities, suburban and urban fringe areas surrounding central cities, and rural areas.<sup>5</sup>

## UNDERSTANDING WHERE CLIENTS WERE FOUND

NSHAPC identified clients for interview through programs serving homeless people. The sample, therefore, is affected by the types of programs and levels of service available in the communities included in the survey. In all 76 geographical areas covered by NSHAPC, programs eligible for inclusion were emergency shelters, transitional and permanent housing for (formerly) homeless people, programs offering vouchers for emergency shelters, soup kitchens and mobile food programs, street outreach programs and drop-in centers. Rural areas, however, generally have fewer programs serving homeless people either exclusively or as a primary part of

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<sup>3</sup> 90% C.I.= ± 10 percentage points for rural clients in both cases.

<sup>4</sup> As described in detail in Chapter 14 of this report, only 47 percent of NSHAPC service locations are in central cities. These service locations include about half of all NSHAPC shelter/housing and food programs, and about 60 percent of all NSHAPC health and “other” programs. Clearly, these figures mean that many programs for homeless people operate outside of central cities.

<sup>5</sup> For simplicity, suburban and urban fringe areas are referred to throughout this chapter as “suburban areas.”

their mission, and they are especially likely to have fewer feeding programs such as soup kitchens. Because of this, NSHAPC extended its client sampling frame in rural areas to include food pantries.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these efforts, Census could not identify any homeless assistance programs of any variety in two of the rural sampling areas.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, no client interviews were done in these two places. It is likely, however, that homeless individuals reside in these locations. It is just as likely that many homeless individuals living in other rural sampling areas were not interviewed because they did not or could not access the few available programs in their community. In addition, programs with the best record in contacting street homeless people (street outreach, mobile food, and drop-in programs) are not common in rural areas. Thus, it is very important to keep in mind that NSHAPC may have missed homeless people in rural areas and their characteristics may differ from other homeless people who use rural homeless assistance programs.<sup>8</sup>

### *Types of Community*

Areas outside of central cities contributed significant proportions of clients. Among homeless clients, 21 percent were found in suburban areas and 9 percent were found in rural areas (71 percent were found in central cities). Seventeen percent of formerly homeless clients were found in suburban areas and 19 percent in rural areas. Twenty-one percent of other service users were found in suburban areas and 40 percent in rural areas (figure 13.1).

## **HOMELESS CLIENTS— DIFFERENCES BY URBAN/RURAL LOCATION**

### *Demographic Characteristics*

On one major demographic measure, homeless clients in suburban areas are the group that stands out from those in other types of communities, while on other measures homeless clients in rural communities are the most different from those in other types of communities. Compared with other types of communities, suburban homeless clients are more female. Rural homeless clients

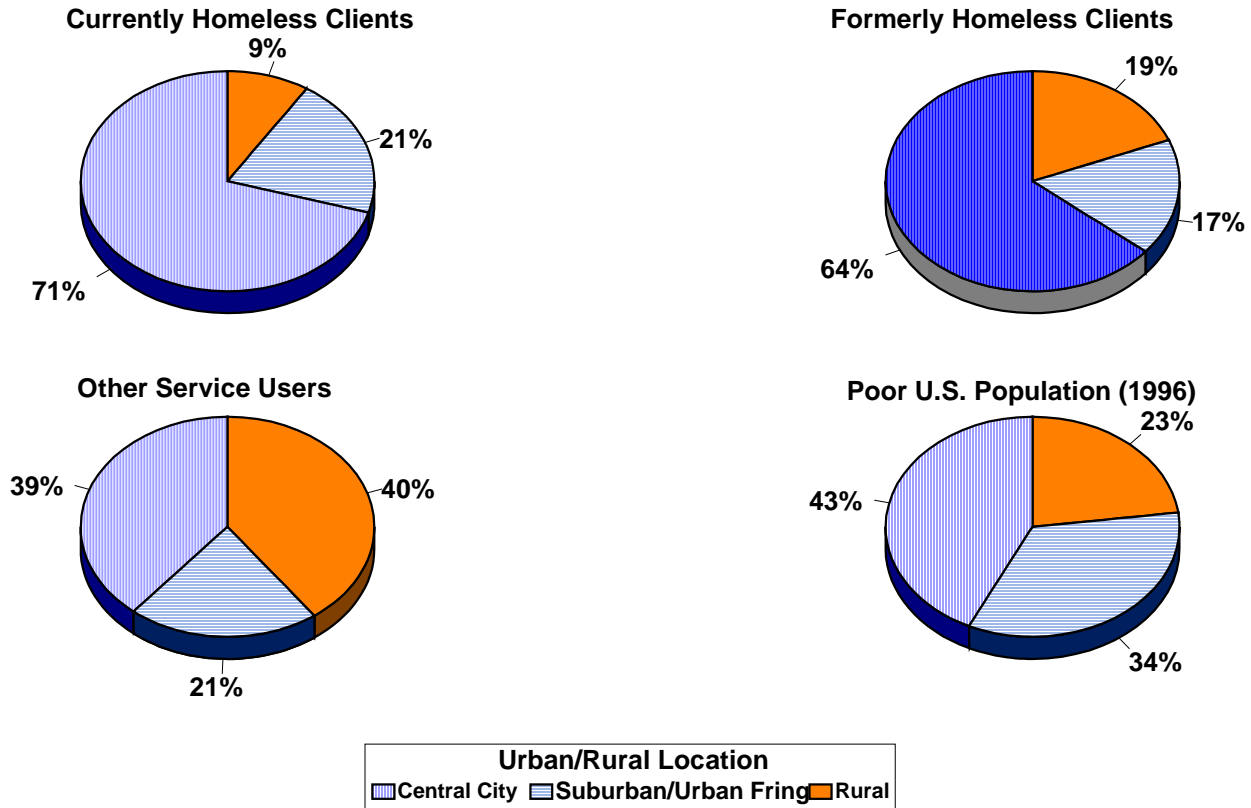
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<sup>6</sup> See the Appendix to this chapter for a description of other sampling variations in rural areas, and why the resulting data have not been included in the analyses for this report.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 17 for a description of what programs were found in each of the sampling areas included in NSHAPC.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the limitations of the NSHAPC survey design for rural areas, see Steven Tourkin and David Hubble, “National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients: Data Collection Methods,” Appendix C of this report.

Figure 13.1  
**Urban/Rural Location by Homeless Status**



Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data. Geographic distribution of 1996 U.S. population in poverty calculated from Lamison-White (1997), P60-198, Table A. Note: Numbers may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

include greater shares of Native Americans, clients aged 35 to 44, and high school drop-outs, and smaller shares of black non-Hispanics, and clients under 35 years old.

Suburban homeless clients are 45 percent female, which is significantly more than the 29 percent female found in central cities and the 23<sup>9</sup> percent female found in rural areas (table 13.1). Rural communities, however, have the smallest share of black non-Hispanics (9 percent) among their clients and the largest share of Native Americans (41 percent, figure 13.2).<sup>10</sup>

In terms of age, rural clients appear to be clustered in the 35 to 44 year age group. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of rural clients fall in this age group, compared with 34 percent of central city clients and 40 percent of suburban clients. Rural areas have the smallest share of homeless clients under age 35 (24 percent versus 38 to 39 percent) and central cities have the highest share of clients age 45 and older (29 percent versus 14 to 21 percent). Consistent with these age differences are differences in marital status among homeless clients. Rural homeless clients are more likely than those in central cities or suburbs to be divorced or separated.

Compared to homeless clients in other types of communities, rural homeless clients have the lowest levels of educational attainment (64 percent have not completed high school compared with 35 percent of central city clients and 36 percent of suburban clients). With the exception of single clients age 25 and older, differences by urban-rural status in the family status of homeless clients are not large.

### *Homeless Experiences*

Clients' experiences with homelessness differ considerably from one community type to another. In general, rural homeless clients have experienced shorter and fewer episodes (or spells) of homelessness during their lifetimes (table 13.2). Rural clients are most likely to be in a first homeless spell lasting six months or less (44 percent). These findings are consistent with other research findings on rural homelessness (Aron and Fitchen 1996; Burt 1995; First et al. 1994; Kentucky Housing Corporation 1993). In contrast, 16 percent of central city clients and 15 percent of suburban clients are in first-time spells that are this short. Suburban clients are most likely to be in a second or higher-order spell lasting more than six months (43 percent), followed by 28 percent for central city clients and 20 percent (the lowest for rural clients (figure 13.3).

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<sup>9</sup> 90% C.I.= ± 9 percentage points.

<sup>10</sup> The characteristics of homeless *rural* clients should be interpreted with caution. Three Native American clients interviewed at the same emergency shelter comprise 1.3 percent of the unweighted homeless rural sample but constitute 34.4 percent of the weighted sample.

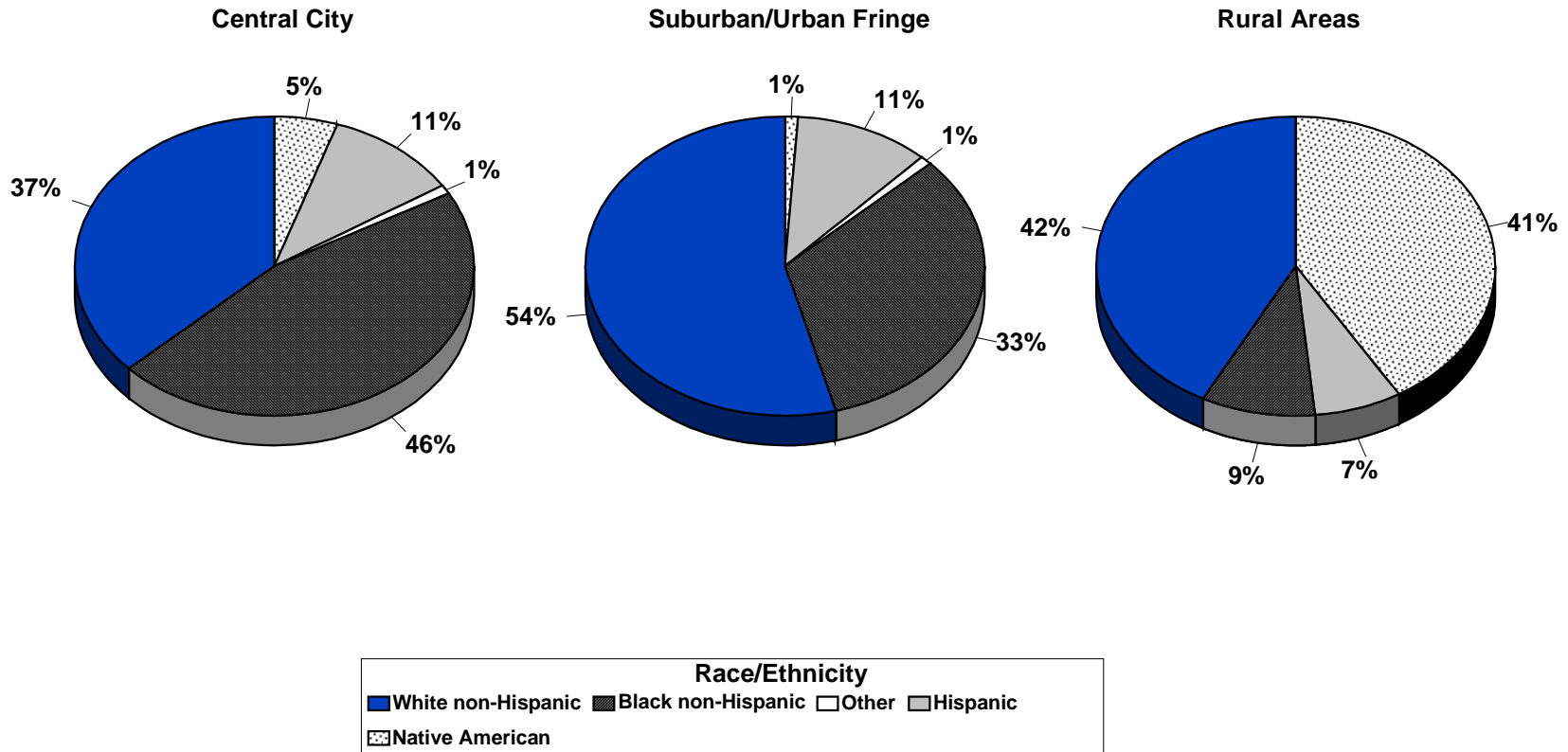
Table 13.1

**Basic Demographic Characteristics of Homeless Clients, by Urban/Rural Location**

	Currently Homeless		
	Central City (71%) (N=2295)	Suburban/Urban Fringe (21%) (N=410)	Rural (9%) (N=233)
<b>Sex</b>			
Male	71(%)	55(%)	77(%)
Female	29	45	23
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
White non-Hispanic	37	54	42
Black non-Hispanic	46	33	9
Hispanic	11	11	7
American Indian	5	1	41
Other	1	1	*
<b>Age</b>			
24 yrs. and under	13	12	7
25 to 34 yrs.	25	27	17
35 to 44 yrs.	34	40	64
45 to 54 yrs.	21	9	8
55 to 64 yrs.	7	6	4
65 or more yrs.	1	6	2
<b>Education/Highest Level of Completed Schooling</b>			
Less than high school	36	35	64
High school graduate/G.E.D.	34	40	13
More than high school	30	25	23
<b>Marital Status</b>			
Never married	51	45	36
Married	7	16	11
Widowed	2	8	3
Divorced	25	17	25
Separated	14	14	25
<b>Living Situation</b>			
Client 17 to 24			
In families			
Men	*	2	0
Women	3	4	3
Single clients			
Men	5	4	3
Women	4	2	*
Client 25 or older			
In families			
Men	2	2	1
Women	9	8	13
Single clients			
Men	64	47	72
Women	12	31	7

Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data. \*Denotes values that are less than .5 percent but greater than 0. Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding. The characteristics of homeless rural clients should be interpreted with caution. Three Native American clients interviewed at the same emergency shelter comprise 1.3 percent of the unweighted homeless rural sample but constitute 34.4 percent of the weighted sample.

Figure 13.2  
**Race/Ethnicity of Homeless Clients, by Urban/Rural Location**



Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data. Note: Numbers may not sum to 100% due to rounding. The characteristics of homeless rural clients should be interpreted with caution. Three Native American clients interviewed at the same emergency shelter comprise 1.3 percent of the unweighted homeless rural sample but constitute 34.4 percent of the weighted sample.

Table 13.2

**Length and Number of Homeless Episodes Among Homeless Clients, by Urban/Rural Location**

	Currently Homeless		
	Central City (71%) (N=2295)	Suburban/Urban Fringe (21%) (N=410)	Rural (9%) (N=233)
<i>Among Currently Homeless Clients</i>			
<b>Length of Current Period of Homelessness</b>			
< 1 week	4(%)	11(%)	Insufficient N
>= 1 week and < 1 month	7	4	
1-3 months	16	7	
4-6 months	11	15	
7-12 months	16	14	
13-24 months	16	19	
25-60 months	12	8	
5 or more years	20	22	
<b>Spell History and Current Spell Length</b>			
First time homeless			
6 months or less	16	15	44
more than 6 months	34	25	18
Not first time homeless			
current spell 6 months or less	22	17	18
current spell more than 6 months	28	43	20
<i>Among Currently Homeless Clients With at Least One Completed Homeless Episode</i>			
<b>Length of Last Complete Period of Homelessness</b>			
Less than 1 month	15	12	Insufficient N
1-3 months	30	28	
4-6 months	17	11	
7-12 months	20	22	
More than 1 year	18	27	
<b>Number of Times Homeless for 30 Days or More</b>			
1	50	41	60
2	17	13	18
3	11	15	6
4 or more	22	30	17

Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data.

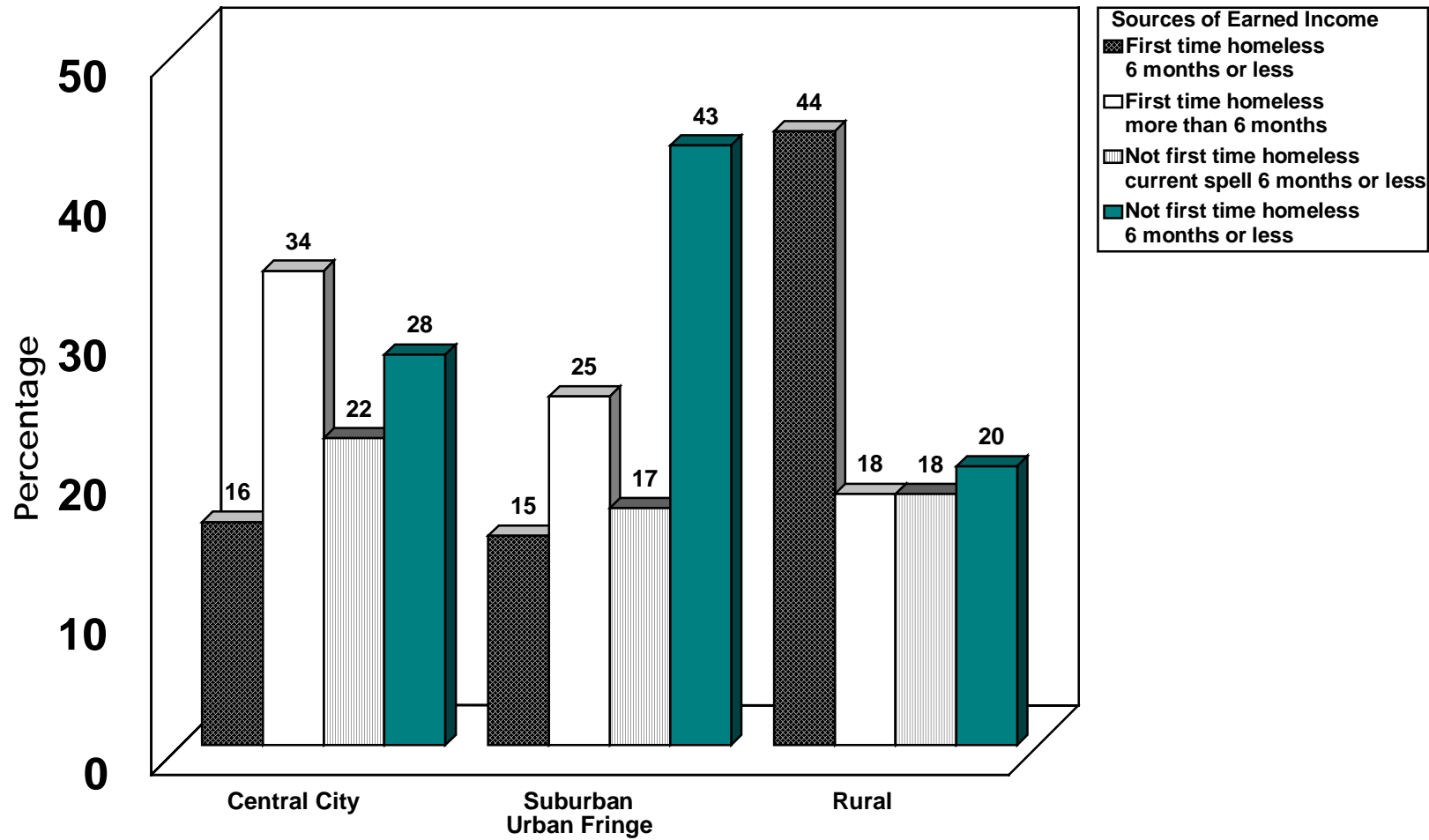
Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Insufficient N signifies that sample size was too small for data to be reported.



Figure 13.3

### Pattern of Homelessness Among Homeless Clients, by Urban/Rural Location



Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data.

Less than a quarter (23 percent) of rural clients have been homeless three or more times compared to 33 percent of homeless central city clients and 45 percent of homeless suburban clients. Interestingly, suburban clients also appear to stand out in terms of the numbers of homeless spells they have experienced, even when compared to their central city counterparts. Homeless suburban clients include the smallest share of single-episode clients and the largest share with four or more episodes. Thus, although their spell lengths are comparatively short, it appears that suburban homeless clients have a great deal of difficulty maintaining stable housing once they secure it.

### *Housing at Time of Interview*

On the day of their interview (table 13.3), a much larger proportion of homeless central city clients (21 percent) report staying in places not meant for human habitation than suburban (12 percent) or rural clients (4 percent). This difference should be interpreted with caution for the following reason: everyone interviewed by this study was found through a service program. These programs included soup kitchens, outreach programs, and drop-in centers to increase the probability of finding homeless people who do not use shelters. To the extent that programs of these types existed in the locations that were part of the study's sample, they greatly increased the likelihood of finding non-shelter-using homeless people. However, such programs are relatively rare in rural areas, so the study had less of a chance in these areas to locate homeless people who do not use shelters. Caution must be used, therefore, in interpreting data for rural areas, since the survey is more likely to have missed non-shelter-using homeless people in rural areas than in central cities or even in suburbs.

On the day of the interview, roughly equal proportions of homeless central city and suburban clients were living in voucher hotels or emergency or transitional shelters (66 and 64 percent, respectively). In rural areas, the proportion of clients in these types of accommodation was lower (49 percent), but still about half of all homeless clients. Finally, the proportion of homeless clients living in private housing increases as one goes from central cities (11 percent) to suburban (22 percent) and rural areas (45 percent).<sup>11</sup>

### *Current and Lifetime Program Use*

Central city homeless clients are more likely than suburban clients to report using a soup kitchen over the previous week (34 percent versus 23 percent) (table 13.3). It is worth noting that these figures may also be affected by the types of programs in each community. For example, if

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<sup>11</sup> This includes a house, apartment, or room that was not part of a transitional program, or a hotel or motel room paid for by the client. The apartment or room often was part of a permanent housing program for formerly homeless people.

Table 13.3  
**Current Housing & Use of Homeless Assistance Programs, by Urban/Rural Location**

	Currently Homeless		
	Central City (71%) (N=2295)	Suburban/Urban Fringe (21%) (N=410)	Rural (9%) (N=233)
<b>Kind of Place Lives Now (Today)</b>			
Places Not Meant for Human Habitation			
Anywhere outside (e.g., street, park)	12(%)	5(%)	Insufficient N
Car or other vehicle	3	2	
Abandoned building	3	5	
Transportation site (e.g., bus station)	3	0	
Place of business (e.g., cinema)	*	0	
Shelter Programs			
Emergency shelter	30	31	
Transitional shelter/housing	28	25	
House/apt./room (transitional prog.)	7	8	
Welfare or voucher hotel	1	*	
Other			
Hotel/motel/dormitory hotel (pay yourself)	4	2	
House/apt./room (not transitional prog.)	7	20	
Other place	4	2	
<b>Type of Program Use Within Last Seven Days or on Day of Interview</b>			
Street <sup>a</sup>	36	23	16
Shelter <sup>b</sup>	71	76	84
Soup kitchen <sup>c</sup>	45	27	29
Other <sup>d</sup>	29	21	27
<b>Individual Programs Used Within Last Week</b>			
Emergency shelter	26	25	45
Transitional housing	28	26	9
Shelter <sup>e</sup>	3	1	12
Permanent housing	4	1	*
Shelter vouchers	1	3	1
Soup kitchen	34	23	29
Food pantry	6	3	3
Mobile food program	6	5	*
Outreach	6	10	5
Drop-in center	11	4	4
<b>Programs Ever Used</b>			
Emergency shelter	67	57	61
Transitional housing	41	40	29
Permanent housing	11	11	3
Shelter vouchers	14	23	12
Soup kitchen	68	50	45
Food pantry	39	44	31
Mobile food program	24	17	9
Outreach	16	17	22
Drop-in center	30	18	14

Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data. \*Denotes values that are less than .5 percent but greater than 0. Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding. <sup>a</sup>This includes clients who reported staying in the streets or other places not meant for human habitation (e.g., abandoned buildings, vehicles) on the day of the NSHAPC interview or during the seven days prior to the interview. <sup>b</sup>This includes clients who reported staying in an emergency shelter, transitional housing program or voucher program on the day of the NSHAPC interview or during the seven days prior to the interview, or clients who were selected for the study at one of these programs. <sup>c</sup>This includes clients who reported using a soup kitchen during the seven days prior to the interview, or clients who were found and interviewed for NSHAPC at a soup kitchen. <sup>d</sup>This includes clients who reported using an other program (food pantry, mobile food, outreach, drop-in center and/or permanent housing) during the seven days prior to the interview, or clients who were found and interviewed for NSHAPC at one of these programs. <sup>e</sup>This includes clients who did not report staying in an emergency shelter, transitional shelter, permanent housing, or voucher program over the last seven days but said yes to question 6.6e that they received food over the last seven days in the shelter where they live. Insufficient N signifies that sample size was too small for data to be reported.

shelters in suburban areas are more likely to be family shelters, then the clients in these shelters are likely to have meals at the shelter and need not rely on soup kitchens. In rural areas, 29<sup>12</sup> percent of homeless clients used a soup kitchen in the week prior to the survey. This is quite high given that only 3 percent of rural homeless clients were selected for the study at a soup kitchen.

Grouping several types of programs together is another way to look at program use or its absence. During the course of the seven days preceding the interview and the day of the interview itself, 36 percent of central city clients slept on the streets or other places not made for habitation. The corresponding numbers for suburban and rural locations are 23 and 16 percent, respectively. Homeless central city clients were also more likely than suburban or rural clients to report soup kitchen use over this time period (45 versus 27 and 29 percent).

Lifetime use of homeless assistance programs varies considerably across the three community types, especially when comparing rural and central city clients.<sup>13</sup> Smaller shares of homeless clients in rural areas report ever having used a permanent housing program (3 versus 11 percent) or a mobile food program (9 versus 17 to 24 percent). Homeless clients from central cities are more likely than those from suburban or rural areas to have used a soup kitchen (68 , 50, and 45 percent, respectively) and a drop-in center in their lifetimes (30, 18, and 14 percent, respectively). The only program used by a greater share of suburban than central city homeless clients is voucher hotels/motels (23 versus 14 percent).

It is important to understand that urban-rural differences in lifetime program use may be affected strongly by variations in the *availability* of such programs across different types of communities. As reported earlier, most programs are in central cities and the number decreases as one moves from suburban to rural areas. Often, the array of programs in central cities, suburban, and rural areas mirrors homeless clients' reports of program use by community type.

### *Income, Income Sources, and Employment*

Income, income sources, and employment differ among homeless clients from central city, suburban, and rural communities (table 13.4). Rural homeless clients received the most money over the last 30 days, with suburban homeless clients falling closely behind, and central city homeless clients receiving by far the least (median incomes of \$475, \$395, and \$250, respectively) (figure 13.5). Indeed, 15 percent of central city homeless clients report no income at all, compared to only 6 to 7 percent of other homeless clients.

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<sup>12</sup> 90% C.I.=  $\pm$  9 percentage points.

<sup>13</sup> Because individuals may have moved from one place to another over time, lifetime program use may reflect programs located in different communities; one should not assume that all programs used by rural clients are rural programs. The same is true of clients in central city and suburban areas.

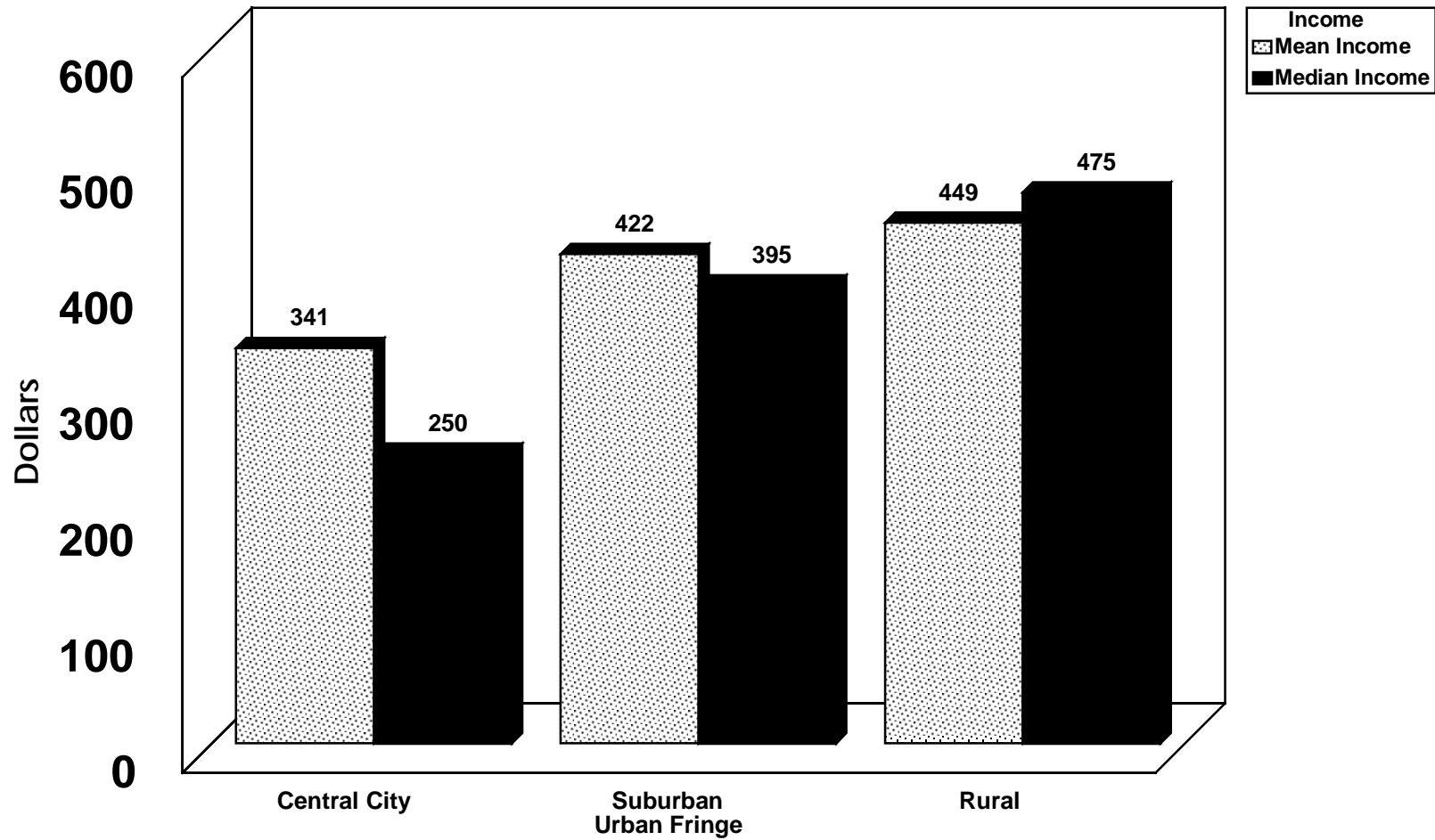
Table 13.4  
**Income, Income Sources, and Employment of Homeless Clients, by Urban/Rural Location**

	Currently Homeless		
	Central City (71%) (N=2295)	Suburban/Urban Fringe (21%) (N=410)	Rural (9%) (N=233)
<b>Mean Income from All Sources (Last 30 Days)<sup>a</sup></b>	\$341	\$422	\$449
<b>Median Income from All Sources (Last 30 Days)<sup>a</sup></b>	250	395	475
<b>Income from All Sources Over Last 30 Days</b>			
None	15(%)	7(%)	6(%)
Less than \$300	38	33	29
\$300 to 499	19	17	16
\$500 to 699	11	20	22
\$700 or more	16	16	27
<b>Did Any Paid Work At All in Last 30 Days</b>	40	49	65
<b>Sources of Earned Income in Last 30 Days</b>			
Job lasting 3 or more months	13	17	9
Job expected to last 3 or more months	7	6	3
Temporary job, non-farm work	7	12	11
Temporary job, farm work	2	1	12
Day job or pick-up job	12	16	23
Peddling	2	3	2
<b>Received Money/Benefits from Government Sources in Last 30 Days</b>			
Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC-families only)	57	44	32
General Assistance	11	5	2
Supplemental Security Income	12	11	5
SSDI	6	17	4
Social Security	2	7	4
Veteran's disability payments	2	*	2
Veteran's pension (not disability related)	1	*	2
Food Stamps	38	38	31
<b>Received Means-Tested Government Benefits<sup>b</sup></b>			
Any, including food stamps	46	45	35
Any other than food stamps	29	27	23
<b>Other Sources of Income Over the Last 30 Days</b>			
Parents	8	6	20
Friends	11	14	16
Asking for Money on the Street	9	6	5

Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data. \*Denotes values that are less than .5 percent but greater than 0. Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding. <sup>a</sup> If an income was reported by client, mid-point of range was used in calculating mean. <sup>b</sup> AFDC, GA, SSI, Food Stamps, and housing assistance.

Figure 13.4

### Mean and Median Incomes of Homeless Clients, by Urban/Rural Location



Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data.

Rural homeless clients are also more likely than other homeless clients to be working (65 percent versus 40 to 49 percent). Rural homeless clients, however, are more likely than central city and suburban clients to have day jobs or pick-up jobs (23 versus 12 and 16 percent) and less likely than their suburban counterparts to have jobs lasting three or more months (9 versus 17 percent) (figure 13.5). These findings are consistent with the fact that many rural jobs are short-term seasonal jobs.

Receipt of some other forms of money or benefits also varies by community type. AFDC receipt by homeless families is highest in central cities (57 percent), next highest in suburban areas (44 percent), and lowest in rural areas (32 percent). Homeless clients from rural areas are more likely than those from other types of communities to have received income assistance from friends (20 percent versus 6 to 8 percent) over the preceding 30 days. By contrast, central city homeless clients, who made the least money (\$250) over the last 30 days, are more likely to be receiving General Assistance (11 percent versus 2 to 5 percent). Finally, even though suburban homeless clients are the most likely of all three groups to have a long-term job, they are also more likely than other homeless clients to be receiving Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) payments (17 percent versus 4 to 6 percent).

### *Health Status*

Suburban homeless clients are more likely than clients in central cities to report acute infectious conditions (35 versus 24 percent) (table 13.5). In terms of specific types of medical conditions, chest infection/cold/cough/bronchitis are most common among suburban homeless clients (30 compared versus 19-21 percent of others).

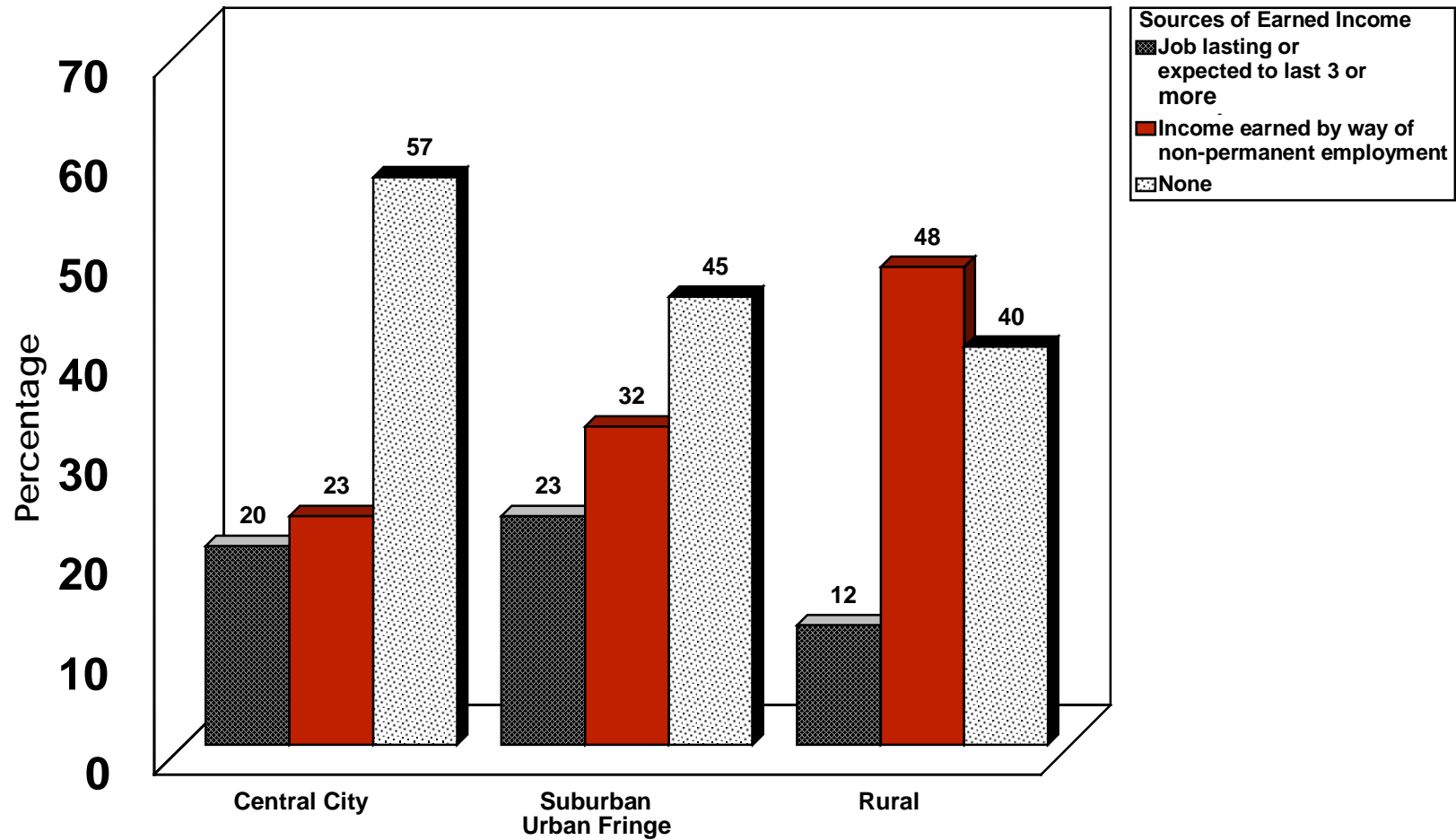
Almost half (47 percent) of homeless rural clients have needed to see a doctor or nurse in the last year but have been unable to do so. Only 22 percent of other homeless clients report this. Homeless suburban clients are much more likely to report having an other source of medical insurance coverage (22 compared to 7 and 8 percent for homeless central city and rural clients).

### *Food Security and Food Status*

Central city and suburban homeless clients report higher levels of food problems than do homeless rural clients. However, a large proportion of rural homeless clients still encounter at least one food problem (table 13.5).

Self-reported food situation is much worse for central city and suburban homeless clients than their rural counterparts. Twenty-nine percent of central city and 28 percent of suburban homeless clients report they “sometimes or often” do not get enough to eat compared to 11 percent of rural homeless clients. By contrast, 62 percent of rural homeless clients report they “get enough of the

Figure 13.5  
Sources of Earned Income Over the Last 30 Days of Homeless Clients, by Urban/Rural Location



Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data.



Table 13.5  
**Physical Health and Nutrition Status of Homeless Clients, by Urban/Rural Location**

	Currently Homeless		
	Central City (71%) (N=2295)	Suburban/Urban Fringe (21%) (N=410)	Rural (9%) (N=233)
<b>Type of Reported Medical Conditions<sup>a</sup></b>			
Acute infectious conditions (1 or more)	24(%)	35(%)	25(%)
Acute non-infectious conditions (1 or more)	7	10	11
Chronic health conditions (1 or more)	48	43	33
<b>Four Most Common Medical Conditions</b>			
Arthritis, rheumatism, joint problems	25	23	18
Chest infection, cold, cough, bronchitis	21	30	19
Problem walking, lost limb, other handicap	14	17	11
High blood pressure	15	16	10
<b>Needed but Not Able to See Doctor or Nurse in Last Year</b>	22	22	47
<b>Type of Current Medical Insurance</b>			
Medicaid	31	31	25
VA Medical Care	8	6	6
Private insurance	4	5	1
No insurance	55	52	63
Other	7	22	8
<b>Best Description of Food Situation</b>			
Get enough of kinds of food wanted	37	35	62
Get enough but not always what wants	34	37	27
Sometimes not enough to eat	19	18	7
Often not enough to eat	10	10	4
<b>Current Food Problems<sup>b</sup></b>			
0	40	46	48
1	18	20	33
2	20	11	11
3	14	17	4
4	9	6	4

Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data. \*Denotes values that are less than .5 percent but greater than 0. Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding. <sup>a</sup> Conditions asked include: diabetes, anemia, high blood pressure, heart disease/stroke, liver problems, arthritis/rheumatism, chest infection/cold/bronchitis, pneumonia, tuberculosis, skin diseases, lice/scabies, cancer, problems walking/other handicap, STDs (other than AIDS), HIV, AIDS, intravenous drugs, and other. <sup>b</sup>Problems include: 1) sometimes or often not having enough to eat, 2) eating once or less per day, 3) in the last 30 days client was hungry but did not eat because could not afford enough food, and 4) in the last 30 days client went at least one whole day without anything to eat.

kinds of food wanted” compared to 35 percent of suburban and 37 percent of central city homeless clients.

It is also interesting to examine the incidence of hunger using the incidence of food problems from none up to four (figure 13.6). This measure reveals that rural clients are not as exempt from food problems as one might infer from the food situation question. Three or more food problems are still more common among central city and suburban homeless clients than rural homeless clients (23, 23, and 8 percent, respectively).

### *Special Needs*

Having at least one current or previous alcohol, drug, or mental health (ADM) problem is equally common among central city, suburban, and rural homeless clients. The types of problems clients report, however, vary by community type (table 13.6).

Similar proportions (between 64 and 67 percent) of homeless clients in the three types of communities have had at least one ADM problem in the past month.<sup>14</sup> Interesting differences emerge, however, when one examines the incidence of mental health and substance use problems separately. The presence of past-month mental health problems does not differ among central city and suburban homeless clients, but both are higher than their rural counterparts (41, 37, and 26 percent, respectively). When specific combinations are examined, rural homeless clients are the most likely to have only an alcohol problem in the past month (33 compared with 10 to 12 percent).

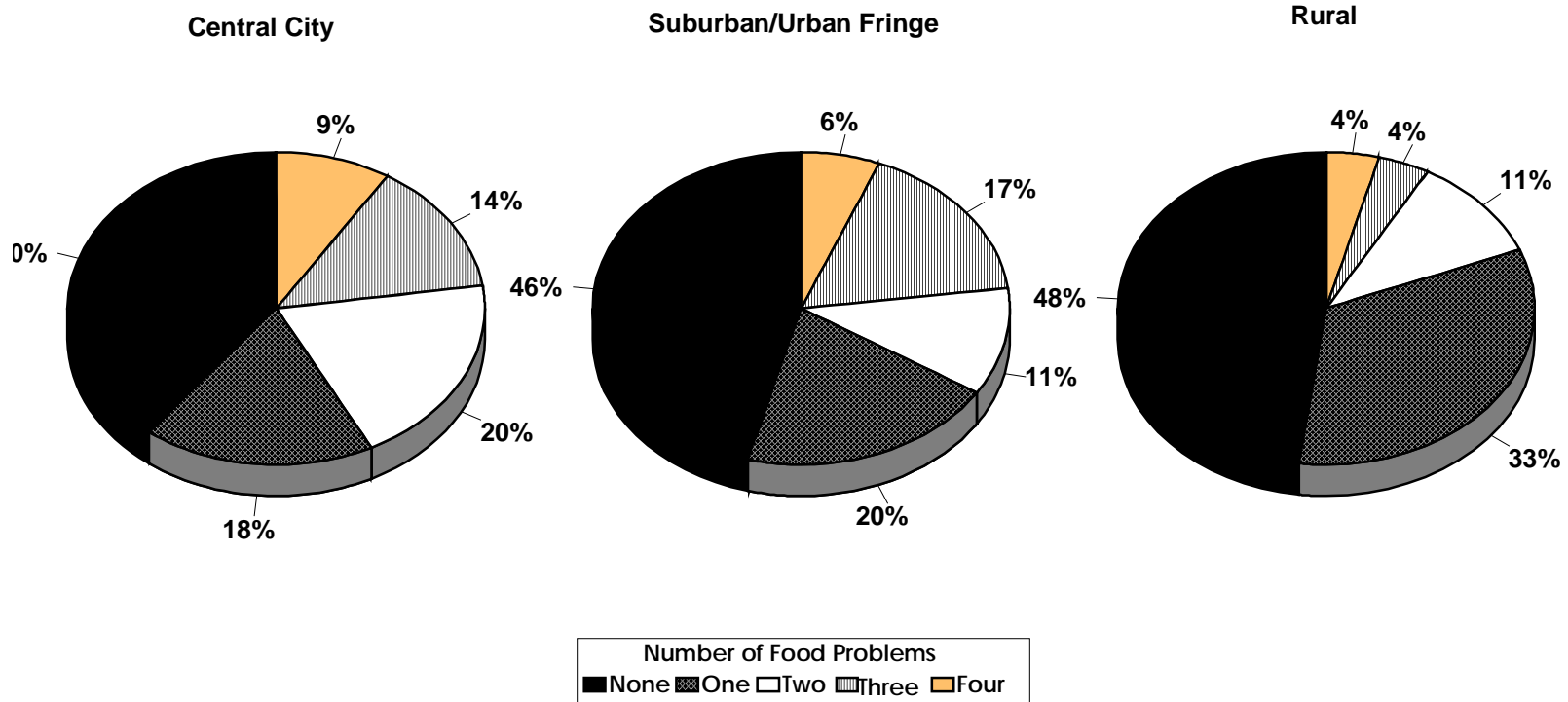
The proportion of homeless clients with one or more ADM problems in the past year also does not differ across community types (75 percent in central cities and 72 percent in both suburban and rural areas). However, as with the incidence of current problems, rural homeless clients have different types of problems than their central city and suburban counterparts. Thirty percent have had a mental health problem in the past year compared to 48 percent of central city and 43 percent of suburban homeless clients. Only 21 percent of rural homeless clients have had a drug problem in the past year compared to 41 and 35 percent of homeless clients in central cities and suburban areas. The only really dramatic difference in terms of specific problems in the past year once again comes in the form of alcohol problems. Thirty-six percent of rural clients report suffering from an alcohol problem only compared to 6 percent of all other homeless clients.

The proportion of people with one or more ADM problems in their lifetime does not differ among community types, being 87 percent in central cities, and 82 percent in both suburban and rural areas. The same pattern observed for the two shorter time periods continues when clients

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<sup>14</sup> The 90 percent confidence intervals for these figures are:  $\pm 4.6$  percentage points or 59.4 percent to 68.6 percent for central city homeless clients;  $\pm 9$  percentage points for suburban homeless clients; and  $\pm 14$  percentage points for rural homeless clients.

Figure 13.6  
**Food Problems Among Homeless Clients, by Urban/Rural Location**



Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data.

Table 13.6  
**Alcohol, Drug, and Mental Health Problems, Victimization, and Incarceration  
Among Homeless Clients, by Urban/Rural Location**

	Currently Homeless		
	Central City (71%) (N=2295)	Suburban/Urban Fringe (21%) (N=410)	Rural (9%) (N=233)
<b>Problems in Past Month</b>			
Alcohol Problems	39(%)	30(%)	48(%)
Drug Problems	28	24	15
Mental Health Problems	41	37	26
Specific Combinations			
Alcohol problem only	12	10	33
Drug problem only	6	10	2
Mental health problem only	15	23	16
Alcohol and drug problems	7	8	5
Alcohol and mental health problems	11	8	4
Drug and mental health problems	6	2	1
Alcohol, drug, and mental health problems	9	5	6
No ADM problems	33	36	33
<b>Problems in Past Year</b>			
Alcohol Problems	48	36	55
Drug Problems	41	35	21
Mental Health Problems	48	43	30
Specific Combinations			
Alcohol problem only	9	11	33
Drug problem only	6	11	2
Mental health problem only	13	21	13
Alcohol and drug problems	12	8	7
Alcohol and mental health problems	12	5	6
Drug and mental health problems	8	5	2
Alcohol, drug, and mental health problems	15	12	9
No ADM problems	25	28	28
<b>Problems in Lifetime</b>			
Alcohol Problems	65	51	66
Drug Problems	63	53	30
Mental Health Problems	60	54	36
Specific Combinations			
Alcohol problem only	6	6	36
Drug problem only	5	9	2
Mental health problem only	8	17	10
Alcohol and drug problems	16	14	8
Alcohol and mental health problems	10	7	6
Drug and mental health problems	9	6	4
Alcohol, drug, and mental health problems	33	24	16
No ADM problems	13	18	18
<b>Lifetime Incidence of Incarceration<sup>a</sup></b>	55	44	67
<b>Experienced Physical or Sexual Abuse Before Age 18</b>	24	33	12

Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data. \*Denotes values that are less than .5 percent but greater than 0. Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding. <sup>a</sup>Places of incarceration include city and county jails, military jail and lock-up, federal and state prisons, and juvenile detention centers.

detail their lifetime ADM problems. Thirty-six percent of rural homeless clients have had a mental health problem in their lifetime compared with 60 percent of central city and 54 percent of suburban homeless clients (figure 13.7). Also, only 30 percent of rural homeless clients have had a drug problem compared to 63 and 53 percent of homeless clients in central cities and suburban areas.

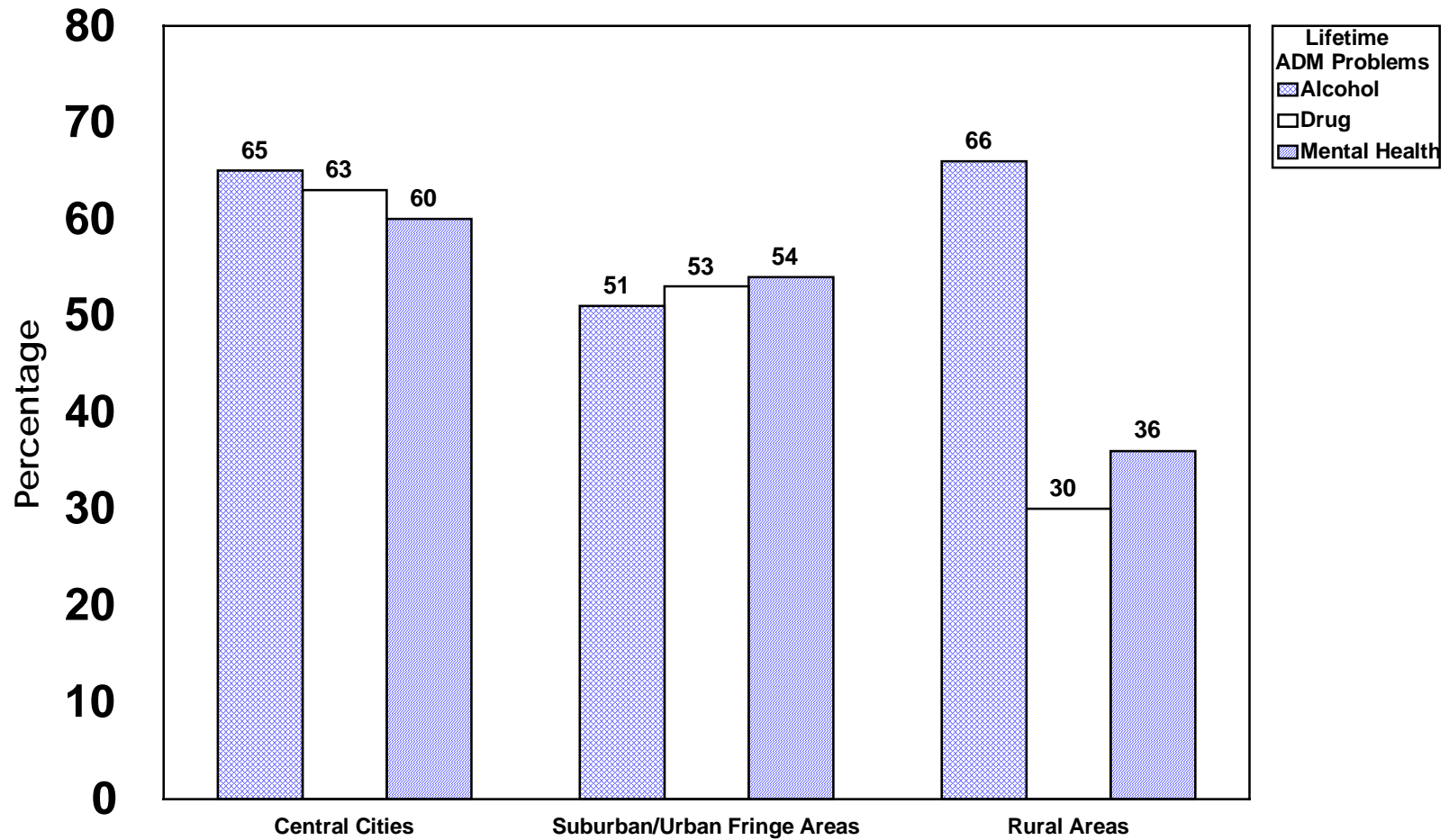
Victimization and Incarceration. Victimization before the age of 18 varies significantly by community type, as does lifetime incidence of incarceration (table 13.6). Homeless clients from suburban areas are the most likely to report having been physically abused or forced to do sexual acts by a household member (33 percent) before the age of 18. Physical or sexual abuse before the age of 18 decreases as one moves from central cities (24 percent) and rural areas (12 percent). Rural homeless clients have the highest rate of incarceration (67 percent) at some time in their lives, followed by central city homeless clients (55 percent). Suburban homeless clients have the lowest rate at 44 percent, but this is still almost half of this group.

#### *Service Needs as Seen by Clients*

No significant differences exist in terms of how clients in each of the three areas view their service needs (table 13.7). In addition, homeless clients in central cities and suburban areas do not differ in their opinions of what is their most important barrier to leaving homelessness. Both report that insufficient income is the biggest barrier they must overcome in order to escape homelessness.

Figure 13.7

### Lifetime ADM Problems of Homeless Clients, by Urban/Rural Location



Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data.

Table 13.7  
**Service Needs of Homeless Clients, by Urban/Rural Location**

	Currently Homeless		
	Central City (71%) (N=2295)	Suburban/Urban Fringe (21%) (N=410)	Rural (9%) (N=233)
<b>Top Responses Clients Provided to "What Are the (three) Things You Need the Most Now?"</b>			
Obtaining food	16(%)	21(%)	19(%)
Finding a job	41	40	51
Finding affordable housing	38	42	29
Assistance with rent, mortgage, or utilities for securing permanent housing	29	33	32
Other <sup>a</sup>	23	29	15
<b>Single Most Important Thing Keeping Client from Getting Out of Homelessness<sup>b</sup></b>			
Insufficient income	29	35	Insufficient N
Lack of suitable housing	11	15	
Lack of job/employment	26	21	
Insufficient education/skills/training	4	3	
Addiction(s) to alcohol or drugs	9	7	
Physical condition or disability	4	1	
Mental health condition	2	3	
Family or domestic instability	1	4	
Insufficient services or service information	2	*	
Other	14	12	

Source: Urban Institute analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data. \*Denotes values that are less than .5 percent but greater than 0. Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding. <sup>a</sup>Refers to needs other than assistance getting food, assistance getting clothing, transportation assistance, help with legal issues, help with parenting, child care services and payment of costs. <sup>b</sup>Question only asked of clients who are currently homeless. Insufficient N signifies that sample size was too small for data to be reported.

## Appendix: 13

Because the number of homeless assistance programs in rural areas was quite low, NSHAPC experimented with several ways of expanding the definition of an “NSHAPC program” in these areas as a way to locate and interview more homeless people. To be considered a “program” in a central city or suburban area, a provider had to offer services or assistance that were: (a) managed or administered by the agency (i.e., the agency provides the staff and funding); (b) designed to accomplish a particular mission or goal; (c) offered on an ongoing basis; (d) focused on homeless persons as an intended population (although not always the only population); and (e) not limited to referrals or administrative functions. This definition of a “program” was also used in rural areas. However, because rural areas often lack homeless-specific services, the definition of “program” was revised (expanded) to include agencies serving some homeless people even if this was not a focus of the agency. About one in four rural programs in the NSHAPC client data collection effort were included as a result of this revised definition.

To summarize the biggest differences between rural clients included through revised definition (RDP) versus regular (RP) programs, the results are examined separately for currently homeless clients, formerly homeless clients, other service users (table 13.RDP1). Among clients found and interviewed in revised definition programs, the very large majority (78 percent) were other service users, with 13 percent currently homeless and 8 percent formerly homeless. By contrast, in regular programs in rural areas 25, 23, and 52 percent were currently homeless clients, formerly homeless clients, and other service users, respectively. Thus, people from RDPs, who make up 19 percent of all other service users, would skew the characteristics of the entire group of other service users if they remained in the analysis.

The biggest differences between RP and RDP clients were:

- Currently homeless clients: RDP clients are much less likely to be male than RP clients (25 versus 76 percent).
- Formerly homeless clients: RDP clients are older than RP clients (14 versus 4 percent over age 65) and less never married (2 versus 17 percent).
- Other service users: RDP clients are very much older than RP clients (69 versus 24 percent aged 65 and older), and far less never married (5 versus 22 percent).

These extreme differences in the other service users subgroups in rural RP and RDP programs argue for dropping RDP clients for at least the other service users analyses. This would be the equivalent of a sampling decision to screen people in RDP sites for homelessness, rather than to take everyone as was done in all RPs. However, this would mean making an arbitrary, after-the-fact decision to eliminate a subpart (other service users) of a subsample (RDP clients) because it did not fulfill the expectations of the survey designers while keeping two other subparts (currently and formerly homeless). Because RDP clients do not contribute very much to the



understanding of either currently or formerly homeless people, the decision was made to remove everyone sampled from an RDP from all analyses presented in this report, and to consider that using RDPs was not an appropriate way to reach more homeless people in rural areas.

**Table 13.RDP1**  
**Differences among Clients Found in Regular and Revised Definition Programs:**  
**Rural Areas Only**

Client Characteristic	Type of Program	
	Regular	Revised Definition
<b>Homelessness Status</b>		
Percent currently homeless	25	13
Percent formerly homeless	23	8
Percent other service users	52	78
<b>Currently Homeless</b>		
Percent of all currently homeless (including RDP)	9	2
	77	25
Percent Male	23	76
Percent 34 and younger	2	0
65 and older	11	3
Percent Married	36	25
Never married	42	58
Percent White		
<b>Formerly Homeless</b>		
Percent of all formerly homeless (including RDP)	19	3
	28	37
Percent Male	36	38
Percent 34 and younger	4	14
65 and older	21	37
Percent Married	17	2
Never married	74	88
Percent White		
<b>Other Service Users</b>		
Percent of all other service users (including RDP)	33	19
	26	24
Percent Male	29	9
Percent 34 and younger	24	69
65 and older	33	31
Percent Married	22	5
Never married	72	88
Percent White		