



# Where Homeless Families Come From: Toward a Prevention-Oriented Approach in Washington, DC

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*...[M]any of the sheltered homeless come right out of our neighborhoods and into our shelters...Perhaps direct intervention (and programs) at the neighborhood level—using the social and physical resources of those neighborhoods—is the optimum way to organize a strategy to address and prevent homelessness. Indeed, the community, with its intimate knowledge, associations and caring at the neighborhood level, should be the keystone of a successful approach for attacking all forms of poverty wherever it exists in our city. In order to pursue such an approach, it is first necessary to target those neighborhoods where the “nearly homeless” and those with the least resources are most likely to live.*

Margaret O'Bryon 1989.

A special report issued by the Fannie Mae Foundation in conjunction with the Tenth Anniversary of the Help the Homeless program



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## **Where Homeless Families Come From: Toward a Prevention-Oriented Approach in Washington, DC**

### **Foreword**

John K. McIlwain  
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The Fannie Mae Foundation is committed to addressing key housing issues facing the communities in which we live and work. In this spirit, ten years ago we launched an initiative called "Help the Homeless." Our mission is to raise awareness of and funds for Washington metropolitan area homeless service providers with an emphasis on programs that help the homeless return to independent living. The program also fosters employee volunteerism in service to the homeless and those at risk of becoming homeless.

Since its inception, Help the Homeless has grown from one company supporting four homelessness service providers to a metropolitan-wide effort with 106 sponsoring partners and 106 beneficiaries in 1996. In the nine years since we began, the campaign has raised nearly \$3.5 million, and more than 30,000 caring individuals have walked in support of Washington area homeless service providers. In this, our tenth year, we will raise over \$1 million and expect more than 100,000 walkers. The funds raised have helped support special projects of area nonprofit agencies that provide essential services to homeless individuals and families. The services offered range from basic shelter to preschool classes for children, rehabilitation from chemical addictions, job training, life-skills management, transitional housing, and homeownership assistance programs. Thousands have been able to return to productive lives because of the commitment of our participating agencies.

This year, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Help the Homeless initiative, the Fannie Mae Foundation commissioned research on family homelessness in Washington, DC. The research examines the current structure of the emergency shelter system for homeless families and proposes a prevention-oriented approach to better meet their needs. This research explores which Washington neighborhoods homeless families come from and describes the social, economic, and neighborhood conditions associated with homelessness. The findings pinpoint specific clusters of residential instability that form logical areas in which to site homelessness prevention programs. In this era of devolution and shifting priorities, it is critical that homeless service providers and policy makers have information of this kind to direct the allocation of scarce resources. This study represents Fannie Mae Foundation's continuing commitment to help inform the debate about policies to ameliorate homelessness.

John K. McIlwain

*Author*

John K. McIlwain is the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Fannie Mae Foundation. He began his career in housing in 1973 as Assistant Director for Finance and Administration, and then Deputy Director, of the Maine State Housing Authority. Prior to joining the Fannie Mae Foundation, he was the first Managing Director of the American Communities Fund, a venture capital fund founded by Fannie Mae and dedicated to investing in hard-to-finance affordable housing development and other community investment opportunities. He was formerly a partner at Powell, Goldstein, Frazer and Murphy where he represented a broad range of clients in the single-family and multifamily housing arenas. McIlwain is the immediate past President of the National Housing Conference, one of the nation's most respected organizations for low-income and affordable housing issues. He is also a past President of the National Housing and Rehabilitation Association and serves on the boards of the Center for Housing Policy and D.C. Agenda. He holds a law degree from New York University and an A.B. from Princeton.

## **Where Homeless Families Come From: Toward a Prevention-Oriented Approach in Washington, DC**

### **Executive Summary**

#### **National Policy Context**

The District of Columbia shelter system currently operates on a continuum-of-care model that assumes all or most people with housing emergencies should enter shelters and move progressively through a series of fully subsidized residential programs, then on to independence. The federal government encouraged the development of this model, and it is one that predominates nationally. This approach, however, is inflexible and has relatively high fixed unit costs because it assumes that all homeless people, regardless of the nature of their housing emergency, should enter a system of supervised residential programs. In fact, not all segments of the homeless population require the extensive social services necessary to help chronically homeless persons.

States and localities recognize that not everyone should enter the shelter system, and have increasingly looked to alternative methods to divert families and individuals from shelters. Typically they combine rigorous needs assessment with emergency housing assistance—such as time-limited rent subsidies, rent arrears assistance, relocation grants, utility assistance, or loans—and often supplement such financial assistance with case management and/or referral to community programs. Homelessness prevention programs target the nearly homeless—those who with assistance can overcome an acute housing crisis and avoid a shelter stay—and generally are delivered in a neighborhood context. Unfortunately, federal funds for homelessness cannot currently be used for such activity.

#### **Study Rationale**

This study examines the origin of homeless families who seek shelter in Washington, DC. An understanding of family homelessness is critical because families are high-level consumers of emergency and transitional housing. Families are the most costly to house because they have more privacy requirements, tend to stay in the shelter system much longer than single persons, and require a more service-enriched environment. Placement in a shelter also gives a family priority consideration for access to Section 8 housing, thereby creating an incentive for entering the shelter system and increasing the potential length of a shelter stay.

The family shelter system in Washington, DC has great unmet demand—only 5 percent of those requesting emergency housing receive it, and the other

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95 percent must wait an average of six months before space becomes available. Recent research suggests that most homeless families experience short-term housing crises and that many can probably avoid initial, repeat, or extended shelter stays if they receive appropriate community support. Thus, they are better candidates for prevention programs and partially subsidized permanent housing than for fully subsidized, supervised, residential programs. The emergency shelter system should not be expected to deliver a continuum of services to all individuals who experience an acute housing emergency; rather, those services should be reserved for the chronically homeless. A very different approach is needed for those who experience a temporary housing crisis.

Research on where the homeless come from can help identify clusters of residential instability that form the logical areas in which to site homelessness prevention programs. In Philadelphia, this research was recently used to site five homelessness prevention programs that serve as neighborhood-based screening centers for the larger shelter system. It is critical that homelessness prevention centers be reasonably accessible to those who are seeking such services. A family desiring to enter the shelter system in DC must first present itself at a central intake facility on M Street, Southwest. At this point the family is placed on a waiting list until shelter space becomes available. Every effort is made to place families in shelters close to their former neighborhoods, but they are frequently forced to locate in other sections of the city. Although children can remain in their school districts, the shelter stay may mean they face long commutes to attend school, which places additional burdens on both children and their parents.

## Findings

Our results are illustrated through a series of maps showing where homeless families last resided prior to seeking shelter. The maps vividly demonstrate that homelessness is not evenly distributed throughout the city, even among low-income neighborhoods. The research also identifies the social, economic, and neighborhood conditions associated with the distribution of homelessness. Policy implications of these findings are highlighted.

### *Finding: A Prevention-Oriented Approach Could Better Serve Homeless and Near-Homeless Families.*

The emergency shelter system is not adequately serving families who are in temporary need of shelter. Currently, 95 percent of the families seeking emergency shelter in the District are put on a waiting list, with an average wait of six months for a vacancy. The current continuum-of-care model requires that families be admitted to the shelter system before support can be provided.

*Implications.* Social support services should be available to those in need of assistance—one should not have to enter the shelter system to receive help. A shift to a prevention-oriented approach would divert those who could possibly avoid a shelter stay and reserve scarce shelter space for acute housing emergencies.

*Finding: Shelter Seekers Come From Spatially Concentrated Areas Within the City.*

This research pinpoints the spatial concentrations of residential instability where homeless families come from. Areas that produce homelessness are highly concentrated—they either produce many shelter seekers or very few, while poverty has a more even distribution. Homeless persons originate in many of the DC places that people would expect; that is, they are often found east of 16th Street and are especially concentrated in Southeast Washington, but discrete locations contribute disproportionately to the homeless problem.

Family shelter seekers come from among the poorest, most racially isolated neighborhoods, with relatively high concentrations of young female-headed households, unemployed persons, and public assistance recipients, and with relatively few elderly households. These are the lowest rent and lowest valued property areas in the District, and have the highest concentration of boarded-up housing.

*Implications.* A place-based, geographically targeted homelessness prevention program is necessary. Prevention programs should be sited in the areas with disproportionate concentrations of shelter seekers. If four such centers were located in Wards 1, 5, 7, and 8 they would place 90 percent of the families requesting shelter within two miles of a center. Some shelters are now located in neighborhoods that do not produce the majority of the homeless population. This means a person must travel some distance to obtain services, further exacerbating real or perceived barriers to access. The loss of community connection breaks whatever tenuous tie homeless families may have had with their neighborhoods.

Place-based approaches enable the prevention system to build upon local networks and support structures within the neighborhood. Such approaches can utilize whatever social capital exists in these communities and strengthens the bonds between potentially homeless families and their neighbors. The development of mutually reinforcing social bonds among community members is a critical step in creating a local safety net for potentially homeless families. A prevention-oriented approach has great potential for mending the social fabric of the low-income communities that produce disproportionate amounts of homelessness.

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## Conclusion

This research provides the basis for planning a neighborhood-based, prevention-oriented approach to family homelessness in the District of Columbia. The first line of defense against homelessness should be a system of community centers, sited in neighborhoods with a high incidence of homelessness, that screen families and provide preemptive services such as energy assistance and rent counseling. Community-based supports provide a cost-effective means to keep many at-risk persons from becoming homeless. As Margaret O'Bryon (1989) of George Washington University noted in her planning study for the Community Partnership to Prevent Homelessness:

...the community, with its intimate knowledge, associations and caring at the neighborhood level, should be the keystone of a successful approach for attacking all forms of poverty wherever it exists in our city. In order to pursue such an approach, it is first necessary to target those neighborhoods where the "nearly homeless" and those with the least resources are likely to live.

Given the great demand for emergency assistance and its geographic concentration, planning for a more thorough and geographically distributed assessment process should be undertaken. The current "waiting-list" system for handling family shelter requests should be reviewed, and the feasibility of providing alternative emergency assistance and community program referrals examined. A broad array of emergency assistance and relocation services, coupled with a process to place eligible households in more intensive community programs, might enable the emergency system to divert those who could possibly avoid a shelter stay and conserve space for those with a need for temporary housing. Such a shift in approach may enable the shelter system to handle any increases in demand that it may experience as a result of shifts in social welfare policy.

Among the advantages are, first, the fact that such programs attempt to work with families and individuals most intensively at the time of crisis and in their communities, rather than at a later point, after they have become stabilized or tracked in the "homeless system." More timely and close-to-home interventions would theoretically have a better chance of piecing informal support systems back together and linking people to community-based services. Second, using existing systems to deliver social, health, and employment training/placement services reduces the need to duplicate those systems in shelters. The money saved can be used to strengthen the responsiveness of larger, better-funded agencies so they can deal with the problems of people experiencing housing emergencies. Third, a system that leverages existing community resources and provides time-limited residential stabilization or transition assistance could potentially serve more people than a system that tries to provide all services in a separate, fully subsidized residential structure.

One major challenge of the homelessness prevention approach is that it may require a reorientation of the existing system for dealing with housing emergencies. Providers, clients, and administrators may find that it is easier to maintain their current practices than to get larger, often unresponsive, community partners to share responsibility for a needy population. New mechanisms of reimbursement or for handling referrals among agencies may be required to counter the tendency of some community-based providers to "cream" the easier-to-serve clients and refer the tougher cases to shelters. A second major challenge is that providing timely prevention assistance requires a thorough needs assessment process. Such a process is critical for effective program targeting and for getting people enrolled as soon as possible in the appropriate programs. Third, a prevention program, by relying on existing family and neighborhood resources, may require providers and clients to accept the fact that doubled-up living arrangements, despite their lack of desirability, may be the only option for many families and individuals.

Finally, and perhaps most important, eligibility determination will be a necessary component of such a program, given that more people are likely to avail themselves of prevention services than would seek admission to a shelter. Eligibility requirements will have to be crafted to screen for verifiable emergencies (utility termination, eviction notice, recent hospital discharge, notice of termination from welfare) or to identify people who are at highest risk of shelter admission (a history of homelessness, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness). An eligibility determination process will be necessary to target assistance to as many as possible of those who would end up in a shelter without such assistance (and to avoid the creaming phenomenon). It may still be the case that eligible households will exceed available resources, putting the system in much the same position as the one currently faced by shelters. Some people will not be able to find alternative housing and will require shelter admission. However, more families and individuals will presumably be able to access a prevention-oriented system, since it is not

tied exclusively to residential program capacity. Nevertheless, the limited availability of resources will be a reality.

Washington, DC, may be in a better position than many other cities to make this shift in programming, particularly as it relates to the problems of homeless families. Indeed, a planning study (O'Bryon 1989) for the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness, as well as the Partnership's stated service objectives, have argued for such a programmatic emphasis.

Currently, families in the District who seek emergency shelter are more often than not (95 percent) placed on a waiting list and sent back either to their prior living arrangements or to an alternative arrangement made by the families. Families must keep their cases active by calling to inquire about vacancies. Only 38 percent of families eventually obtain a shelter placement, after an average wait of six months (Steve Cleghorn, personal communication, September 18, 1997). Assuming that most of these families are living in difficult, crowded, or unaffordable arrangements, they are still avoiding a shelter stay, and many would presumably be ideal candidates for prevention programming.

Rather than a passive waiting period, an intervention could be arranged to assess the families and help them either stabilize their current arrangements or move into other housing. The intervention could include conflict resolution and linkage to job training programs or health programs, if appropriate. Case management programs, which many cities use to help families discharged from shelters in their transition to independence, could be moved up to the "front door" of the system and used instead to keep currently housed families from coming into the shelter system at all. In many cases, this work could be accomplished without resorting to admission to an emergency shelter, which for most of the families is forestalled anyway because of capacity restrictions.

### *A New Paradigm: Empirical Support*

Recent research on homelessness in New York City and Philadelphia has been used to investigate the feasibility of homelessness prevention as a policy and programmatic option. That research has found that homelessness is a relatively common experience among poor households in both cities. Over a one-year period, approximately 1 in 10 poor children under the age of five stays in a public shelter in these cities, including 16 percent of poor African-American children; this number increases to 20 percent of poor African-American men in their 30s and 40s (Culhane and Metraux 1996a). However, most shelter episodes are relatively brief, and most people have only a single episode over a three-year period (Culhane and Kuhn 1998). Also, 80 percent of single homeless people exit relatively quickly (50-day average in New York City, 21-day average in Philadelphia) and do not return. Not surprisingly, as a group, these "transitionally" homeless persons are less likely to have substance abuse and

mental health problems, compared with the chronic and episodically homeless (Kuhn and Culhane 1998).

Similarly, among families, most leave shelters relatively quickly, and the key factor that explains the likelihood of readmission is whether on discharge a family received a subsidized housing placement; those who receive a placement have a very low rate of readmission (7.6 percent) (Wong, Culhane, and Kuhn 1997). Considered together, this evidence suggests that most homeless families and individuals have short-term housing crises and that most of them can probably avoid initial, repeat, or extended shelter stays if they receive appropriate community supports. In other words, they are better candidates for prevention programs and partially subsidized permanent housing than fully subsidized supervised residential programs.

Recent research has been instrumental in understanding where homeless people come from and assessing whether there are clusters of residential instability that would be logical locations for homelessness prevention programs. For example, three relatively small, dense clusters that accounted for nearly 70 percent of the cases of family homelessness in New York City and Philadelphia were identified (Culhane, Lee, and Wachter 1996). In Philadelphia, this information was used to site five homelessness prevention programs. It has also been helpful in trying to understand factors that mediate the risk for homelessness and could be the target of interventions to reduce that risk. For example, in both cities, housing vacancies and abandonment were positively related to the distribution of homeless families' prior addresses. These findings led to further work, investigating warning signs for abandonment risk (Culhane, Schill, and Wachter 1996) and using community organizing and housing preservation strategies to reduce the risk for family homelessness in distressed housing (Roob 1996). Other research has examined how prior address distribution corresponds to utility terminations. In Philadelphia, 25 percent of homeless households lived at an address where the gas had been shut off in the year before shelter admission; these accounted for 10 percent of all such terminations citywide (Culhane and Lee 1995). These findings suggest that utility terminations should be a flag for prevention program eligibility and that emergency energy assistance could be critical in reducing the risk of homelessness.

### The DC Study

The research reported here is designed to investigate the distribution of the prior addresses of families seeking shelter in Washington, DC. Having established that distribution, the research seeks to characterize it statistically and to compare it with the distributions in New York City and Philadelphia. Further analyses are undertaken to identify the characteristics that are associated with this distribution and that may suggest policies to support a prevention-oriented approach to family homelessness in Washington, DC.

Data for this study were obtained from 14 months of intake records (May 1996 through June 1997) at the central assessment site for families seeking shelter in Washington, DC. As of May 1, 1996, the assessment included collection of prior address information (abstracted from the paper records) for all families requesting emergency shelter. A total of 1,232 addresses were collected, 84 percent of which had accurate enough information to enable geocoding, using geographic information systems. These address-matched addresses were overlaid with census tract and block group maps obtained from the 1994 TIGER files and were then aggregated by block group and census tract. Other socioeconomic variables at both the block group level ( $N=576$ ) and the census tract level ( $N=192$ ) were abstracted from the 1990 Population and Housing Census.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

The aggregated address information was plotted by block group. To differentiate the degree of concentration, the location quotient (LQ), that is, the ratio of the rate of concentration of a characteristic in a block group to the citywide rate of the concentration of that characteristic, was used. If the LQ of a block group has a value greater than 1, this indicates that characteristic is relatively concentrated in that block group, compared with the citywide distribution.

To further characterize the spatial distribution and to enable comparison with other characteristics or jurisdictions, indices of dissimilarity, contiguity, and clustering were calculated (for equations, see Culhane, Lee, and Wachter 1996). The dissimilarity index (DI) measures how unequally an object group is distributed in a given area, the contiguity index (Moran's I, or MI) captures how contiguously an object group is distributed, and the clustering index measures how closely the concentrated areas of an object group are located.<sup>1</sup> The index values were compared with those of two other large U.S. cities, New York and Philadelphia (Culhane, Lee, and Wachter 1996).

### *Regression Analysis*

The regression model assumes that the rate of shelter requests in an area is a function of other socioeconomic factors, including demographic configuration, income and economic status, and housing market conditions. Table 1 provides a list of the variables used to estimate the probability of shelter requests in a block group and the predicted direction of association. To choose a model specification, three functional forms, including semilog, full-log, and linear models, were tested. The semilog specification performed best in terms of the adjusted  $R^2$ . Among the 576 block groups, 71 block groups had missing values

<sup>1</sup> See Culhane, Lee, and Wachter (1996) for more detailed discussions on the indices and their mathematical forms.

Table 1. Variable Definition

Variable Name	Definition	Expected Sign
RBLACK	Ratio of black persons	+
ROVER64	Ratio of persons over 64	-
RNOHIGH	Ratio of persons without a high school diploma	+
RFHHOLD	Ratio of female-headed households	+
RFYOUCHD	Ratio of female-headed households with children under six years old	+
ROLDFAM	Ratio of families with householder over 64 years old	+
RUNEMP	Ratio of unemployment	+
MNHHPAI	Mean household public assistance income	-
RNOPOV	Ratio of persons below the poverty level	+
MEDVALUE	Median property value	-
MEDCOREN	Median contract rent	-
RRENT	Ratio of rental units	+
RBOARDUP	Ratio of boarded-up housing units	+
RNOHMLS	Ratio of homeless	+

in the explanatory variables used in the regression and were dropped from the final set of data, leaving 505 block groups in the study.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

The rate of family shelter requests during the 14-month period from May 1996 through June 1997 was 0.47 percent of the total number of households in Washington, DC. Thus, one out of every 200 households in the District requested shelter. As shown in figure 1, most of the concentration occurs in the southeast quadrant of the District, particularly in Wards 7 and 8, east of the Anacostia River. Southeast Washington accounts for more than half (57.8 percent) of the family shelter requests citywide. Two other areas of concentration in the northeast quadrant include Wards 1 and 5: 99 percent of the cases come from the eastern half of the District. For comparison purposes, figures 2 to 5 depict the relative concentration of persons below the poverty level, black persons, median contract rents, and boarded-up housing units, also at the block group level.

Figure 2 shows that persons below the poverty level are also concentrated in the southeast quadrant. The clustering index calculated for homelessness and poverty confirms that the two subjects exhibit an identical degree of clustering (0.71 and 0.71), although homelessness is more unevenly (DI) and less contiguously (MI) distributed than poverty (see table 2). In other words, areas of high concentrations of shelter requestors occur in spatially contiguous areas ("cluster") to a degree equal to the poverty rate. However, areas produce either many shelter requestors or very few, while poverty is more broadly distributed. Poverty rates in adjacent areas are also more comparable overall,

*Figure 1. Block Group Map of Shelter Request Rate*

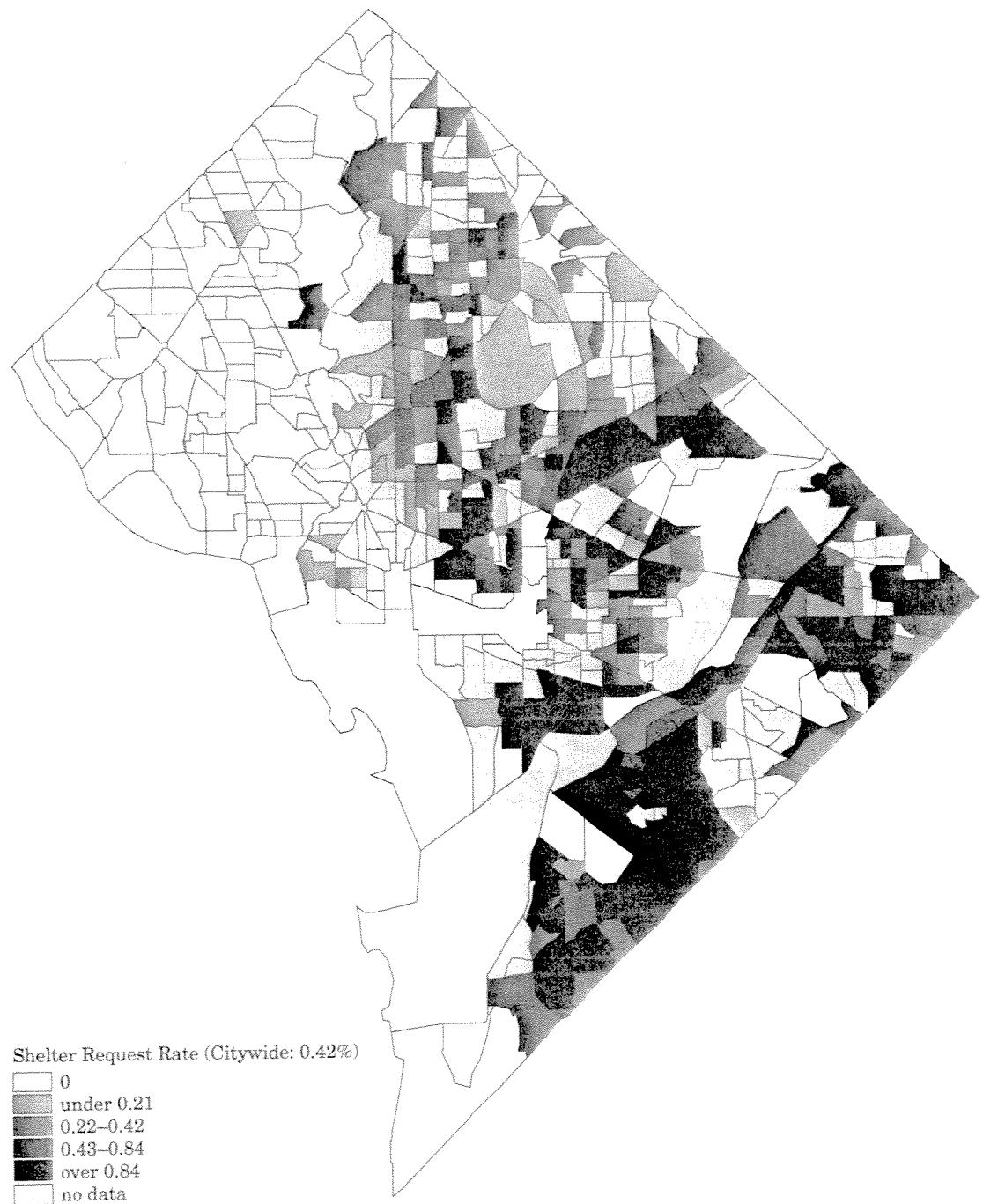
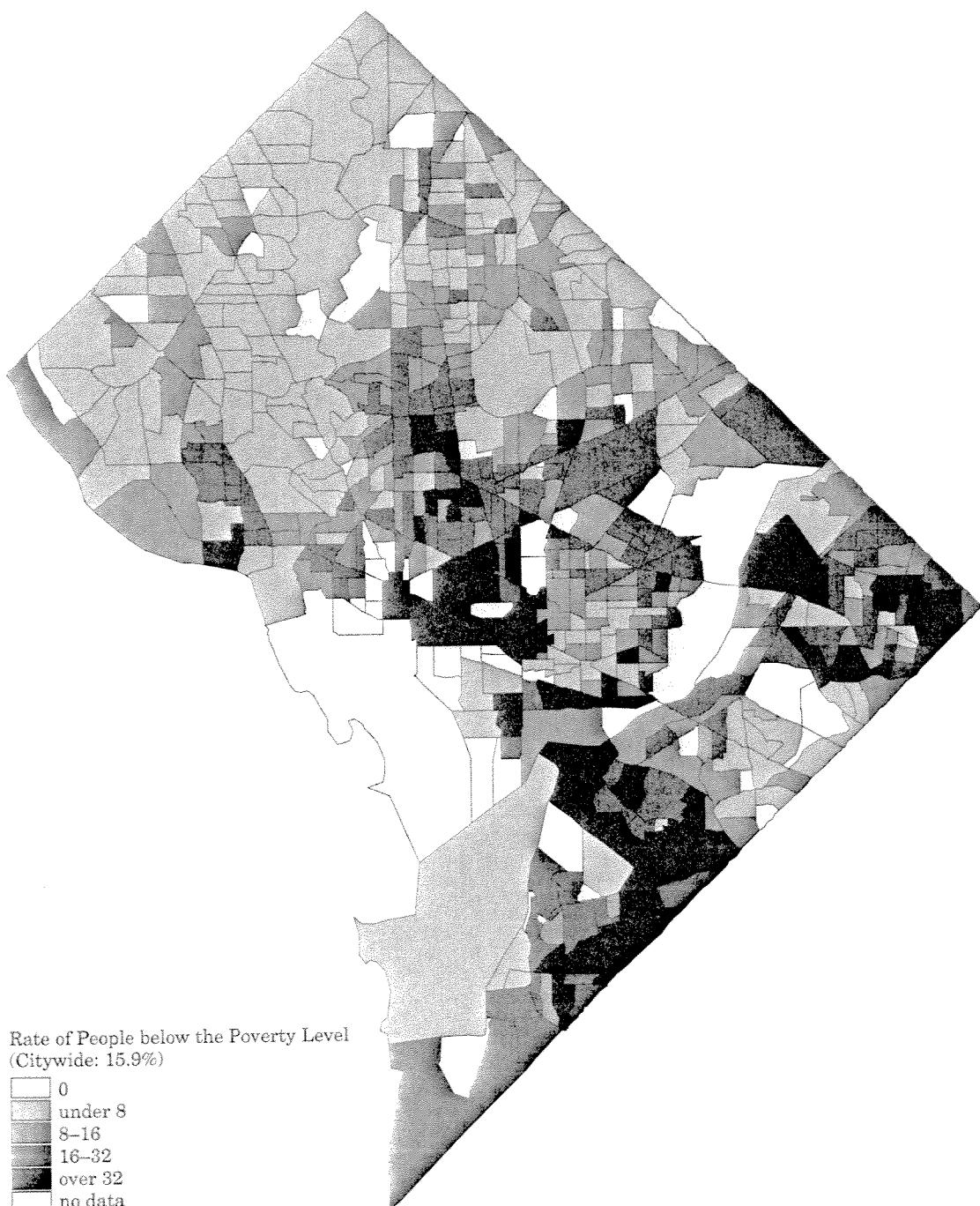
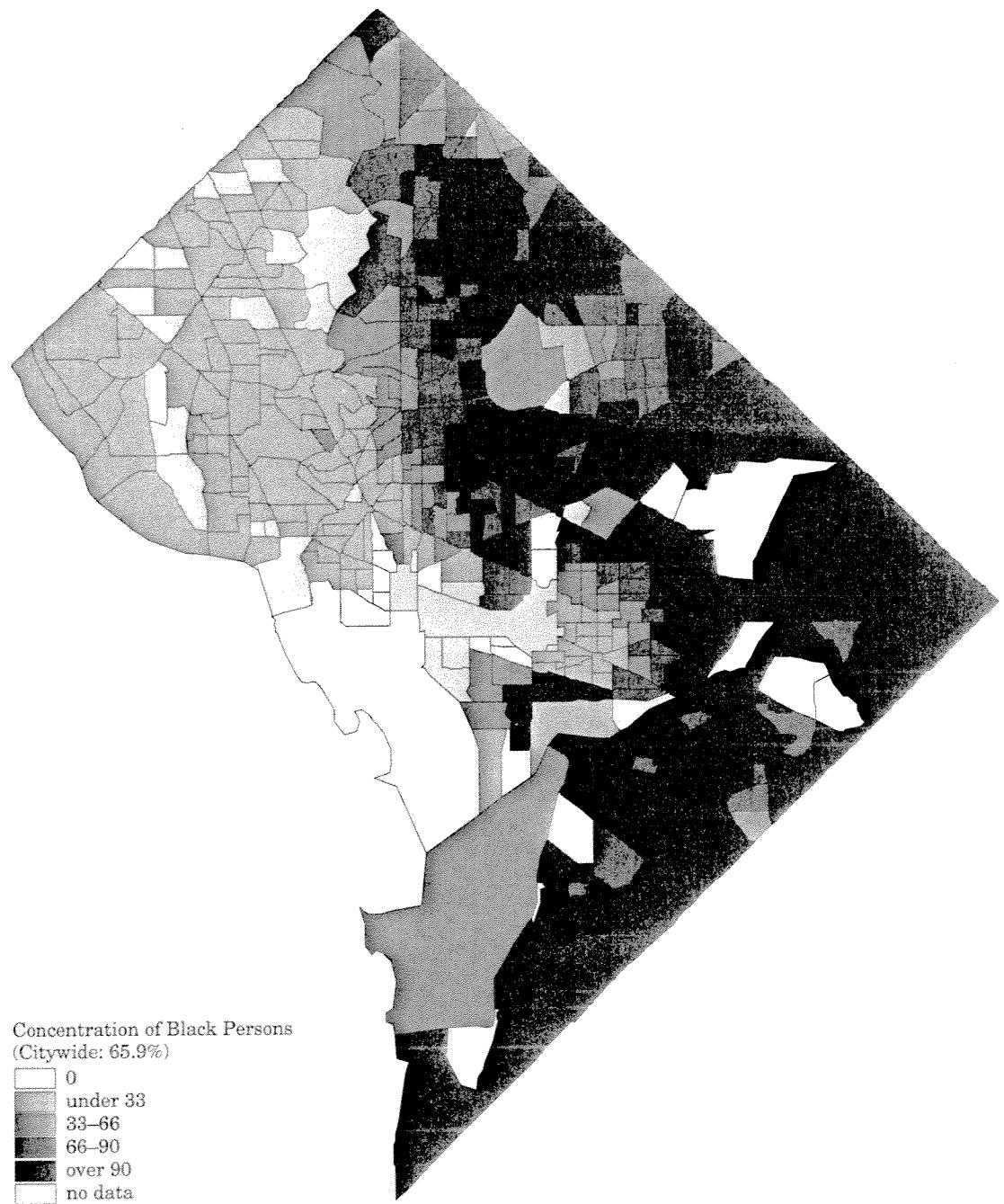


Figure 2. Block Group Map of Poverty Rate



**Figure 3. Block Group Map of Concentration of Black Persons**



*Table 2. Indices of Unevenness, Contiguity, and Clustering*

	New York City Tract	Philadelphia Tract	Washington, DC	
			Census Tract	Block Group
<b>Dissimilarity Index</b>				
Homeless	0.54	0.58	0.45	0.52
Poor	0.40	0.37	0.34	0.39
Black	—	—	0.74	0.75
<b>Moran's I</b>				
Homeless	0.62	0.52	0.04	0.11
Poor	0.65	0.54	0.38	0.29
Black	—	—	0.79	0.67
<b>Clustering Index</b>				
Homeless	0.86	0.85	0.72	0.71
Poor	0.80	0.72	0.74	0.71
Black	—	—	0.85	0.82

including in lower and moderate poverty rate areas, thus producing higher contiguity (MI) and lower unevenness (DI) values.

For comparison, tract-based indices were also calculated. Results show that Washington, DC, exhibits a lower degree of unevenness, contiguity, and clustering among its family shelter requestors than Philadelphia and New York City. The prior addresses of shelter requestors in Washington, while very highly concentrated, are less so than in New York City and Philadelphia, regardless of the measure of spatial distribution used.

Figure 3 shows that African Americans are also concentrated in the eastern half of Washington, DC. Black households are widely dispersed in the city, but the distribution of comparably concentrated areas is very discontinuous. As a result, all three indices (dissimilarity, contiguity, and clustering) measuring the distribution of spatial concentration are highest for the rate of black persons compared with poverty and homelessness. It is noteworthy that all the areas with the highest relative concentration of shelter requestors (LQ greater than 1.0) are also areas where more than 90 percent of the households are made up of black persons.

For comparison with the distribution of housing characteristics, the spatial distributions of median contract rents and the ratio of boarded-up housing units are shown in figures 4 and 5. Figure 4 shows that the eastern half of Washington has the lowest median rent areas, which is a general proxy for housing quality, while figure 5 depicts the distribution of the rate of boarded-up housing units, which are concentrated in the southeast quadrant. The distribution of boarded-up housing appears to conform closely to the distributions of poverty and shelter requestors.

Table 3 shows the sample statistics of the variables used in the regression model, including the correlation coefficients between the rate of shelter request (RNOHMLS) and the model variables. The table reveals that all the variables are positively correlated with homelessness, except the rates of elderly (ROVER64), households with children headed by someone over 64 years old (ROLDFAM), median property value, and median contract rent, which are negatively correlated with homelessness. Each of these correlations is in the same direction as those in the previous study for Philadelphia and New York City.

*Table 3. Sample Statistics*

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation and Coefficient
RNOHMLS	505	0.47	0.77	1.00
RBLACK	505	67.52	38.04	0.37
ROVER64	505	13.96	8.12	-0.22
RNOHIGH	505	24.86	16.20	0.43
RFHHOLD	505	21.01	14.61	0.53
RFYOUCHD	505	4.83	7.05	0.49
ROLDFAM	505	12.41	9.37	-0.08
RUNEMP	505	8.98	9.58	0.39
MNHHPAI	505	365.04	397.76	0.40
RNOPOV	505	13.88	11.78	0.46
MEDVALUE	505	181153.00	132545.00	-0.35
MEDCOREN	505	516.48	220.12	-0.40
RRENT	505	49.14	27.92	0.32
RBOARDUP	505	1.70	3.80	0.26

In summary, family shelter requestors from Washington, DC, come primarily from a few geographic clusters, with half of the families coming from the southeast quadrant. On the basis of simple correlation coefficients, these areas tend to be among the poorest, most racially isolated African-American neighborhoods, with relatively high concentrations of young female-headed households, unemployed persons, and persons receiving public assistance income, and with relatively few elderly households. These are the areas with the lowest rents and lowest property values in Washington, and they have the highest concentration of boarded-up housing.

### *Regression Results*

The descriptive results included the correlation coefficients between the rate of family shelter requests and the regression model variables. The regression analysis provides additional information by considering the correlational relationship between all the model variables and the shelter request rate simultaneously. Many of the model variables share variation with each other and the shelter request rate (racially isolated areas and poverty, for example); thus, the regression model is designed to identify the marginal effect of each

variable, while controlling for the shared influence of the other variables in predicting the shelter request rate.

The standardized coefficients in table 4 show that nearly all the variables in the model act in the expected direction. Areas with higher rates of shelter requests have higher rates of black persons, persons without a high school education, female-headed households (especially those with children under the age of six), unemployed persons, and poverty; relatively more rental housing; and more boarded-up buildings, even controlling for their shared variation with the rate of shelter requests. Areas with higher rates of shelter requests have relatively lower rates of elderly households and lower amounts of public assistance income.

*Table 4. Regression Results for Block Group (Semilog)*

Variable	Standardized Estimate	<i>t</i> for Null Hypothesis
INTERCEP	0.000	-0.519
RBLACK	0.050	0.502
ROVER64*	-0.093	-1.908
RNOHIGH	0.059	0.755
RFHHOLD**	0.241	3.190
RFYOUCHD**	0.176	3.149
ROLDFAM	-0.032	-0.539
RUNEMP**	0.190	4.386
MNHHPAI	-0.014	-0.258
RNOPOV	0.055	0.864
MEDVALUE*	0.088	1.038
MEDCOREN	-0.018	-0.237
RRENT	0.025	0.417
RBOARDUP	0.030	0.747
<i>N</i>	504	
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.45	

\* significant at the 10 percent error level

\*\* significant at the 1 percent error level

Contrary to what was expected, these areas are less likely to include elderly-headed families with children (or subfamilies, an indicator of crowding) and relatively higher valued properties, controlling for the other variables. In other words, among poorer African-American neighborhoods, the rate of elderly-headed subfamilies acts to reduce the risk for shelter requests. Shelter requests are also more likely to come from more highly valued properties among these poorer, racially isolated areas.

Unfortunately, although the variables act in the predicted direction, those two exceptions notwithstanding, only three of the variables achieve statistical significance at the 0.01 level, all positively associated with the rate of shelter requests: the rate of female-headed households, the rate of female-headed households with preschool children, and the rate of unemployed persons. The

negative association of the rate of elderly households approaches significance. The lack of statistical significance could be a function of the relatively short period of observation (14 months) compared with the research in New York City (seven years) and Philadelphia (five years). The short period may also have contributed to a more uneven aggregate distribution at the block group level (many block groups had zero cases).

## Discussion

The addresses of family shelter requestors from Washington, DC, are highly clustered: More than half originate in the southeast quadrant of the city. Homelessness prevention programs could be most efficiently located in the areas with disproportionate concentrations of requestors. Indeed, if prevention program centers were located in Wards 1, 5, 7, and 8, 90 percent of the families would be within two miles of a center. The research approach demonstrated here could be used as a monitoring tool to measure the pattern of shelter requests over time.

Caution should be exercised, however, in interpreting the distribution of shelter requestors as accurately representative of the distribution of housing emergencies or of the need for emergency assistance. By choice, some homeless persons may use services in places where they feel most comfortable, which could lead to some areas having a higher rate of shelter requests than would be expected given the amount of distress in the neighborhood. For example, the location of the central intake site for families could selectively restrict access because of real or perceived barriers in getting to the site. A trend toward racial homogeneity in the shelters, so that African Americans are overrepresented in some shelter populations, could contribute to perceived cultural barriers for non-African Americans (Hispanics, whites), who have been found to be underrepresented in public shelter systems, even after controlling for differences in poverty (Culhane and Metraux 1996b). In siting prevention programs, care should be taken not to reinforce barriers to access to emergency services by not attending to these potential selection effects.

The distribution of shelter requestors in Washington, DC, revealed less clustering, dissimilarity, and contiguity than was found in New York City and Philadelphia. This may be a function of the greater economic diversity enabled by the larger land areas of those cities, so that the homelessness and poverty distributions exhibit more "enclaveness" than in Washington, DC. Conversely, a smaller land area and less population diversity in the District may lead to a more prevalent, distributed pattern of poverty and homelessness. Philadelphia and New York City also had higher clustering of homelessness than poverty, whereas Washington showed an equal degree of clustering for the two distributions. Again, this may indicate a lower level of economic diversity in the city, so that the homeless distribution had a clustering and dissimilarity index value not unlike the poverty distributions for all three cities.

The correlation results and multivariate model suggest that the distribution of family homelessness is a function of the geographic concentration and isolation of female-headed households with children, particularly those with children under the age of six. The significance of the latter variable, even with the former included in the model, indicates that the presence of preschool children in female-headed households exerts additional strain on family and residential stability. This may result from the greater likelihood that younger families are living with other families or extended family members, the greater likelihood that new children will exert strain on the capacity of such family supports, and the greater likelihood that families with preschool-age children will have difficulty participating in the labor force, because of the child care needs of preschool children and less work experience among younger mothers.

The additional significance of unemployment as a predictor suggests that households in these areas, both the women—who may have child care and work force history limitations—and the men are experiencing serious barriers in accessing the labor market. The importance of unemployment as a predictor of homelessness should be especially noted, given welfare reform regulations that require recipients to obtain work within specified time limits. These data suggest that in some areas of the District, barriers to employment will contribute to both lost income among such households and increases in shelter requests.

The other variables in the regression model, while not achieving statistical significance, nearly all performed in the expected direction. Taken together with the correlation coefficients, these model variables indicate that family shelter requestors come from the more racially and economically isolated areas of the District, where people have lower overall educational attainment, where rates of public assistance receipt are higher, where property values and rents are comparatively low (and housing quality likely poor), and where abandonment of housing is more prevalent. As in New York City and Philadelphia, these results paint a portrait of neighborhoods in distress, where the housing markets are fragile to nonfunctional and the structural conditions bode poorly for the future. These areas are both more likely to be affected by welfare reforms because of their numbers of recipients and least likely to be prepared for the employment objectives of welfare reform because of their educational attainment levels. Declines in public assistance income would increase the poverty concentrations in these areas, further threatening the viability of marginal, lower-rent housing markets, and would potentially increase housing abandonment, as owners have difficulty making necessary repairs and meeting overall operating expenses.

From a policy analysis perspective, these results provide a basis for caution and vigilance in monitoring the household and neighborhood impacts of welfare reform. Given the potential for greater demand for emergency assistance and its geographic concentration, planning should begin for a more thorough, geographically distributed assessment process. The current “waiting-list”

system for handling family shelter requests should be reviewed and the feasibility of a neighborhood-based homelessness prevention program considered. As noted in the introduction, the waiting period could be used to address the housing instability problems of the families so as to avoid the need for shelter placement. Many of the families likely to request emergency shelter are going to be those who are adversely affected by welfare reform; therefore, the emergency services system could be used to identify people for community programs that would provide more intensive employment training and placement assistance than these people might otherwise receive as part of standard transitional assistance programs such as Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). A broad array of emergency assistance and relocation services, coupled with a process for placement of eligible households in more intensive community programs, might enable the emergency system to handle the increase in demand that it will likely experience without the costs of more shelters. Proper funding for such programs, particularly the potential use of TANF block grant funds, will have to be considered.

Other potential policy implications of this study include the need for community development and housing stabilization strategies to combat homelessness and the potential negative spatial effects of welfare reform. Moreover, the neighborhoods identified here might also be targeted for programs designed to link poor and near-poor households with opportunities outside these neighborhoods (mobility strategies). Interagency collaboration between the emergency assistance system and more traditional community providers will be critical to making successful service linkages for wait-listed families and will likely require the active involvement of administrators of major social service delivery systems. And unless more subsidized housing is available, means of supporting doubled-up living arrangements will have to be explored and guidelines developed for evaluating when such arrangements are viable as alternatives to shelter admission.

## Conclusion

The recommendations of this research are similar to those made in a report by the Institute for Urban Development Research at George Washington University in 1989 (O'Bryon 1989). That report, which served as the planning document for the creation of the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness, concluded that targeted, neighborhood-based approaches to homelessness would offer the best first defense against the problem:

[M]any of the sheltered homeless come right out of our neighborhoods and into our shelters.... Perhaps direct intervention (and programs) at the neighborhood level—using the social and physical resources of those neighborhoods—is the optimum way to organize a strategy to address and prevent homelessness. Indeed, the community, with its intimate knowledge, associations, and caring at the neighborhood

level, should be the keystone of a successful approach for attacking all forms of poverty wherever it exists in our city. In order to pursue such an approach, it is first necessary to target those neighborhoods where the "nearly homeless" and those with the least resources are most likely to live (p. 2).

This study has directly addressed the targeting issue identified in that report. It is hoped that the District of Columbia can use this information to modify its system for serving homeless families.

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