

# Family Homelessness in Virginia: Understanding the Extent

## Overview

Homelessness in Virginia decreased by 13 percent between 2005 and 2009.<sup>1</sup>

Among sub-populations:

- Homelessness among families decreased by almost 9 percent.
- Chronic homelessness<sup>2</sup> decreased by 26 percent.

The exact causes of the decreases are unknown. The more significant decrease in rates of chronic homelessness is likely due to increased availability of permanent housing—specifically permanent supportive housing<sup>3</sup>—for this sub-population.

While statewide rates of homelessness decreased, many communities did experience increases. A look at local level data provides an understanding of each community's reality. For example,

- Roanoke and the surrounding area reported an 18 percent increase in homelessness from 2008 to 2009, the highest level in 22 years.
- Arlington County faced a 50 percent increase in the number of families experiencing homelessness from January 2008 to January 2009.

To assess the full scope of the problem, the population at considerable risk of homelessness must be taken into account. **Approximately 20,000 of Virginia's families with children are doubled up living with family or relatives and are at high risk of homelessness.**<sup>4</sup> Service providers across the Commonwealth report vast increases in the number of people seeking assistance for housing, food and other needs. Recent economic downturns seem to have made many more families vulnerable to homelessness as jobs are lost and savings dwindle.

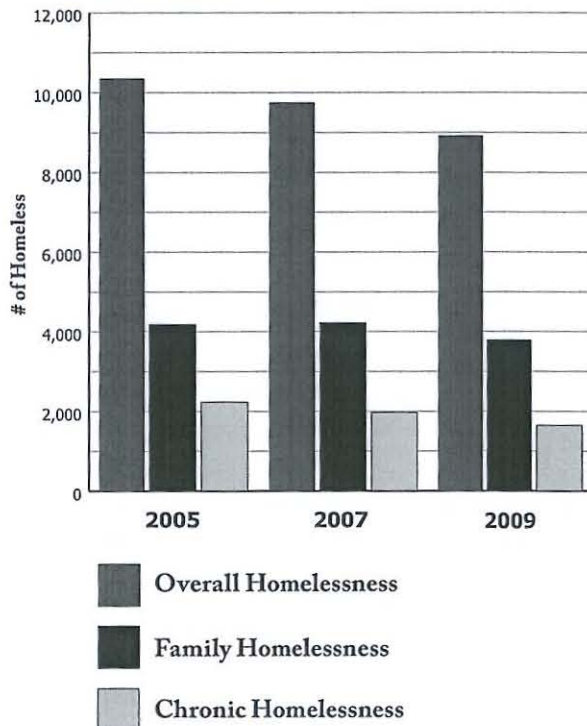
## The Scope of the Problem in Rural Virginia

Due simply to population figures, the number of people who are homeless in rural Virginia is much smaller than that found in urban communities, however, homelessness exists in rural Virginia. In addition, service providers in rural Virginia report that many are doubled up with friends or family, and these families and individuals are at high risk of homelessness. Accurate data on homelessness in rural Virginia is severely lacking.

## Data Collection Methods

Data on rates of homelessness is derived from a compilation of "point-in-time counts" – a one-night count held biennially<sup>5</sup> in January of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness.

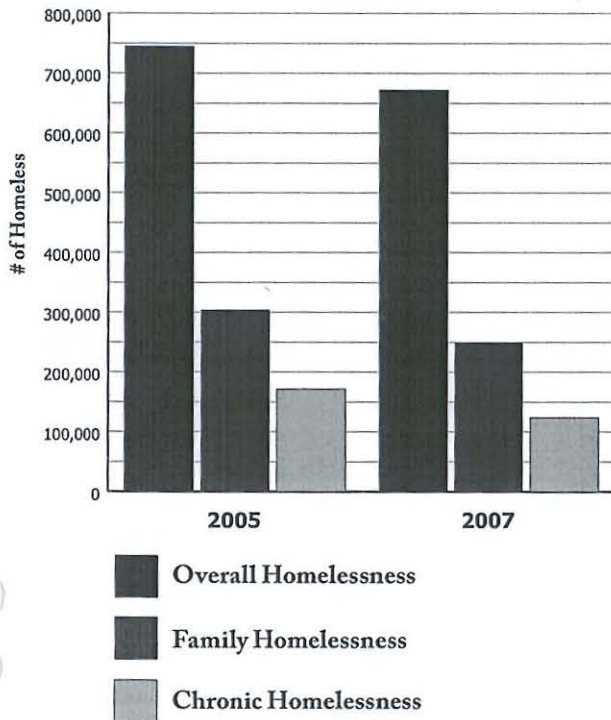
RATE OF HOMELESSNESS IN VIRGINIA:  
TOTAL AND BY SUB-CATEGORY



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The point-in-time counts indicate the estimated number of people experiencing homelessness on any given night, according to the federal definition of homelessness<sup>6</sup> used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). No data set is perfect and this set is an estimate. In addition, HUD's definition of homelessness does not always accurately assess the full scope of the problem, particularly in understanding the number of people who are at risk of homelessness and rates of homelessness in rural communities.

**Rate of Homelessness in the United States:  
Overall and By Sub-Population**



Yet these data are critical to understanding whether rates of homelessness are increasing or decreasing and whether a community's strategies to prevent and end homelessness are working.

In addition to collecting information on rates of homelessness, communities use the Homeless Information Management System (HMIS), a computerized data collection tool designed to capture client-level, system-wide information over time on the characteristics and service needs and history of those experiencing homelessness. Analysis of HMIS data increases understanding of the local extent and scope of homelessness, identifies service gaps and informs systems design and policy decisions.<sup>7</sup> This data system is implemented locally and is not calibrated to provide statewide information.

HMIS also facilitates service coordination among service providers in large areas. According to Andy Kegley, Executive Director of HOPE, Inc. (Helping Overcome Poverty's Existence) in Wytheville: "HMIS can be really valuable in an area as rural and as spread out as southwest Virginia. Service providers in Wytheville do not necessarily know service providers in neighboring jurisdictions. But as clients often move frequently from place to place, service providers across the region and the state can easily access and understand a client's past service history and experience of homelessness."

## Opportunities and Recommendations

Consistent and reliable data on rates of homelessness can indicate whether a community's strategies to prevent and end homelessness are effective. Communities have refined and continue to improve data collection methods to understand the scope and extent of homelessness.

### 1. Assess the feasibility of establishing a statewide Homeless Management Information System (HMIS.)

Data collection leads to a more comprehensive understanding of a problem and assists policy makers in shaping policies that address the root causes of a problem. A statewide HMIS will provide a more complete picture of the causes of homelessness in Virginia. This picture will enable the creation of more coherent policies, leading to practical solutions for homelessness across the Commonwealth.

### 2. Incentivize service provider participation in HMIS.

Increased participation in HMIS will increase data quality and allow each locality and the Commonwealth to better understand the causes of homelessness, client service needs, recidivism and effective interventions to end homelessness and prevent its reoccurrence.

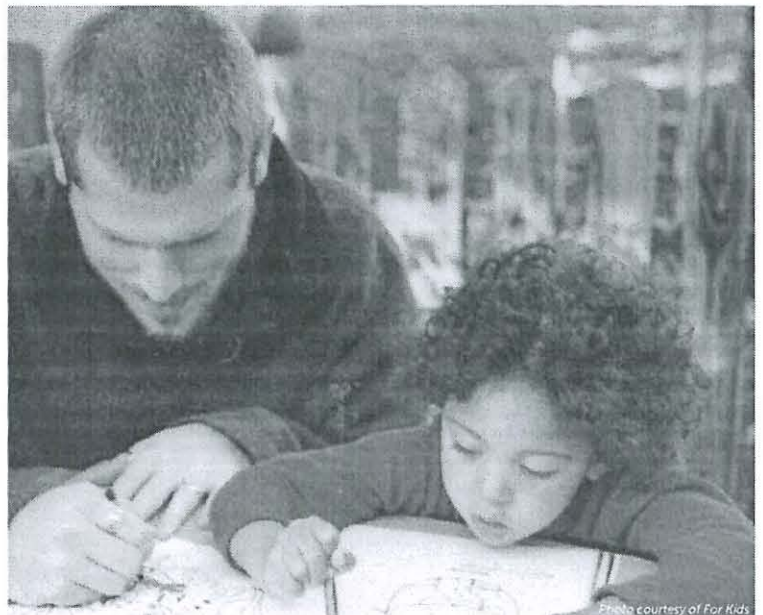


Photo courtesy of For Kids



Local and state government can incentivize HMIS participation by establishing participation guidelines for local and locally-controlled state and federal funds. Special care must be taken for agencies serving victims of domestic violence as there are privacy concerns for this population.

### **3. Refine data collection methods for point in time counts, especially for rural communities.**

Communities must implement best practices to continually improve data collection. It is difficult to fully assess the extent and scope of homelessness in rural communities using the common point in time data collection methods and therefore methods specific to rural areas must be developed and implemented.

### **4. Collect data on the at-risk of homelessness and doubled up population to inform homeless prevention policy requests.**

Those who are doubled up with family and friends are often one step away from homelessness. Many communities, although not required to do so, include information on the doubled up population in official reports on rates of homelessness. This information is easily accessed from the local school homeless education liaisons who use the U.S. Department of Education's definition of homelessness which is broader than the HUD definition. Data on those at risk of homelessness are essential to educating the public on the full scope and extent of the problem and the need to focus on prevention initiatives. This data will also be a valuable resource for providers in creating mitigation programs. ■

1 Thanks to the the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development for the 2009 data and to the National Alliance to End Homelessness for the 2005 and 2007 data. See "Background" to understand how the data is collected.

2 The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines "chronic homelessness" as "an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has either been continuously homeless for a year or more, or has at least four (4) episodes of homelessness in the past three (3) years." In order to be considered chronically homeless, a person must have been sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g., living on the streets) and/or in an emergency homeless shelter. A "disabling condition" is defined as "a diagnosable substance abuse disorder, serious mental illness, developmental disability including the co-occurrence of two or more of these conditions." The definition was recently expanded to include families provided the family meets all other criteria. (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Policy Requirements and General Section to HUD's FY2009 NOFAs for Discretionary Programs. 2008. Washington, D.C.)

3 Permanent supportive housing is affordable housing linked with supportive services. According to the Corporation for Supportive Housing, it is "... available to, and intended for, a person or family whose head of household is homeless, or at-risk of homelessness, and has multiple barriers to employment and housing stability, which might include mental illness, chemical dependency, and/or other disabling or chronic health conditions."

4 U.S. Census. 2000. This is the number of households that identified another family living there, living below the poverty line and with at least one child.

5 Communities applying for federal McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Grants are required by HUD to count biennially although many communities conduct counts more frequently.

6 The United States Code lists the official federal definition of homeless as "an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is 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); an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings." Several federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Education, use a different definition of homelessness.

The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act, signed into law by President Obama in February 2009, expands the statutory definition of homelessness to include "people residing in an institutional care setting who lived in a shelter or place not meant for human habitation immediately prior, people who will imminently lose their housing in fourteen days, unaccompanied youth and homeless families who have a history of housing instability, and people fleeing domestic violence situations."

7 "The Blue Ridge HMIS" Powerpoint Presentation. Council of Community Services, Roanoke.



Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness

VCEH

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*The Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness is the statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing and ending homelessness in the Commonwealth of Virginia through community collaboration, capacity building, education and advocacy.*