

The State of Homelessness in Billings

2012

A review of current conditions of homelessness in the Billings, Montana area as well as associated risk factors.



Introduction

Homelessness is a condition that affects all of us. When a commercial airs about a child in need, we often feel an emotional tug. That feeling perhaps resurfaces when we pass by a homeless person begging on the street.

In reality though, it doesn't take a sign or plea for us to be connected to homelessness, it's already a part of our lives. To understand this, we must first understand the ways in which homelessness in our community is much more diverse than popular images convey.

For each visibly homeless person on the street, there are four others that few people know are homeless. Yet we see them everyday. In Billings, it could be one of almost 500 children that went to school with your son or daughter last year. Or maybe the family in line ahead of you at the grocery store is one of more than 125 such families experiencing homelessness at any time in Billings. These are people that we would never guess are homeless—and who are likely themselves immeasurably more shocked to find themselves in that position.

In Billings, as in the nation at large, homelessness is most often a temporary crisis that confronts low-income households following some setback.ⁱ As a result, talking about “the homeless” is fairly elusive: for most of the people experiencing homelessness, that label had never before pertained to them and in a short while, won't any longer.

Yet even for the people that seem closer to preconceived notions of homelessness, it is important to critically engage with their situations rather than to accept the often-malign assumptions accompanying such stereotypes. In Billings particularly, a number of conditions seem to contribute to a situation wherein mental illness is a common hardship for much of the homeless population. But though people have been known to act insensitively towards an eccentric homeless guy on the street, few are unsympathetic to schizophrenia.

Consequently, the purpose of this assessment is to identify characteristics and patterns among those experiencing homelessness—in order to get a better grasp of what homelessness looks like in Billings and what challenges it entails. Similarly, this review also focuses on determining what possible risk factors could be contributing to homelessness within the Billings community.

Defining & Measuring Homelessness

As part of the process to receive federal funding for homeless programs through the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), organizations involved in impacting homelessness come together in a “**Continuum of Care**” (CoC) to plan and implement measures to reduce homelessness.ⁱⁱ In the last week of January each year, most Continuums conduct a count of homelessness persons within their area. This “Point-in-Time” survey forms the basis of the official count of homeless persons.

In determining the number of homeless persons, HUD officially defines homelessness through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Services Act in a way that is narrower than the manner in which most members of the homeless services community look at homelessness. As such, HUD includes a supplementary category of “**Precariously Housed**” in addition to the official category of “**Literally Homeless.**”

“**Literally Homeless**” persons are generally those people that are either in a shelter for homeless persons or are otherwise in a place not meant for human habitation, including outside, in an abandoned building, or in a car. “Precariously Housed” persons, on the other hand, includes those who do not have a home of their own, but are living temporarily in an institution such as a hospital, in a hotel or motel, or staying “doubled up” with friends or family on an emergency basis.

For the purposes of this review, we have largely kept to the “Literally Homeless” definition, while also noting the number of additional individuals that fall under the “precariously housed” definition of homelessness.

In the future, homelessness will be counted differently. In December of 2011, HUD changed its definition of homelessness through Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (**HEARTH**) Act, enacted in 2009 to amend McKinney-Vento. The new definition will expand eligibility in important ways, especially for those in imminent risk of homelessness.ⁱⁱⁱ For the 2012 Point-in-Time Survey, however, the previous McKinney-Vento definition remains in effect and as such we have continued to use it for our own analysis.

It’s worth noting, however, that the McKinney-Vento Act does allow for the use of a broader definition of homelessness in the case of one population: youth. Youth may qualify as homeless if they are

staying doubled-up or in a motel/hotel because they lack permanent housing.^{iv} With the HEARTH Act, HUD has clarified that “Youth” should now be interpreted as less than 25 years old, revising previous guidance for de facto application of the federal statute interpretation of “youth” as less than 22 years old.^v

Scope of Homelessness

Based on the 2012 Point-in-Time figures, the homeless population in Billings appears quite high.

Homeless in Billings

Literally Homeless: 608

Precariously Housed: 124

Typically, homelessness rates are measured in terms of homeless individuals per 10,000 people (literally homeless). If the above figure of 608 persons was calculated for just the population of the city of Billings (104,000 at last measure), the rate would be 58. Comparing this figure to the last publically available list of homelessness rates by Continuum of Care—in 2007—Billings would rank in the highest 3-4% of Continuums.

If figured are instead derived based on the Billings Metropolitan Statistical Area, consisting of Yellowstone and Carbon Counties (population 158,000), the rate would drop to 38 and place Billings in the top 11-13%.^{vi}

Of course, homelessness has increased since 2007, but nevertheless, compared to homelessness rates in the 100 largest MSAs

for 2011, Billings MSA would tie for 7th *highest*, along with San Jose/Sunnyvale/Santa Clara CoC, Seattle/Tacoma, and Stockton, California.^{vii}

Demographics of Homelessness

Age and Family

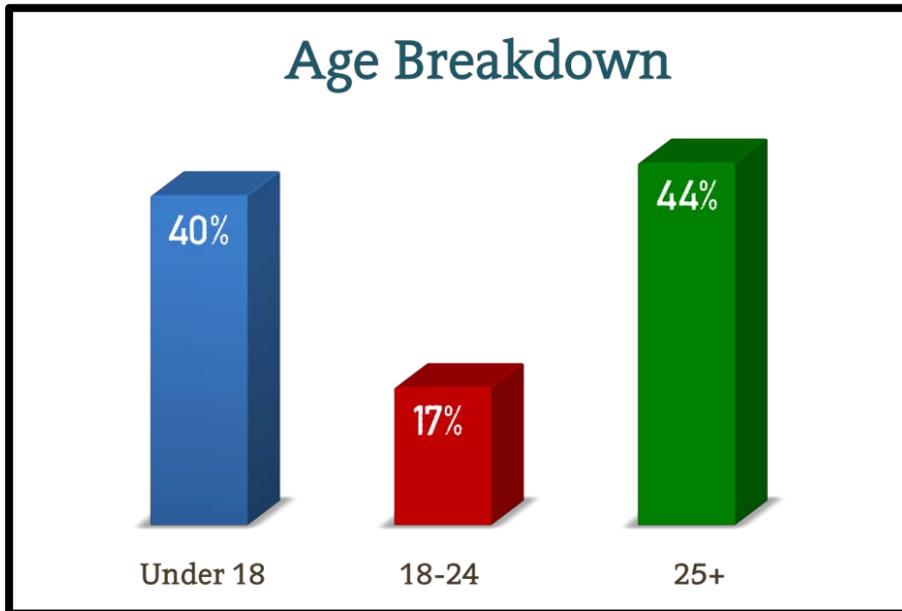


Figure 1: Age (PIT Survey 2012)

Immediately, one notices that homelessness in Billings does not conform to the typical stereotypes. Although the requirements to qualify as homeless are somewhat relaxed for youth, nevertheless a staggering 57% of the “Literally Homeless” are under 25. In fact, even if adults qualified under the same guidelines, just fewer than 50% of the homeless population would be less than 25 years old.

More insight comes when we look at the breakdown of households by type. Although there are actually a greater number of single-person households homeless in Billings, families account for the greatest number of people.

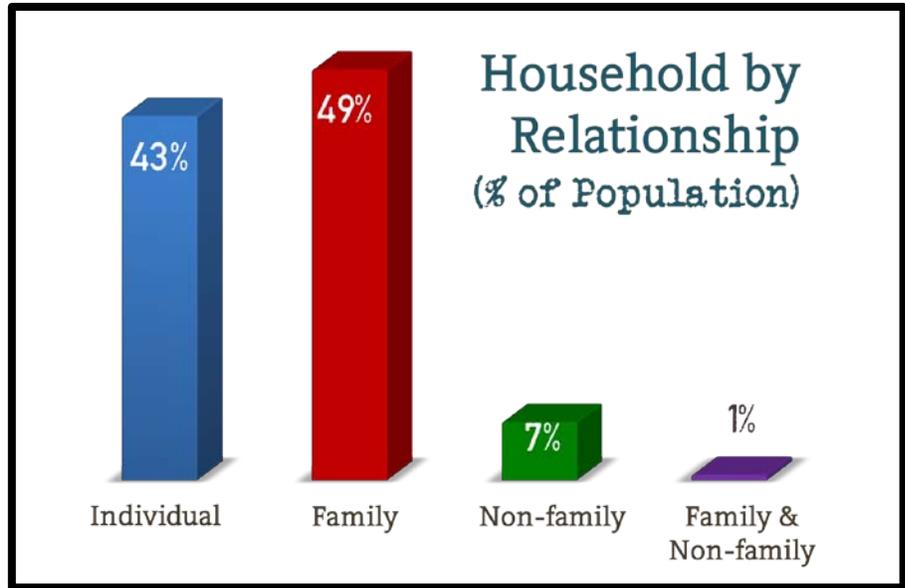


Figure 2: Household Type (PIT Survey 2012)

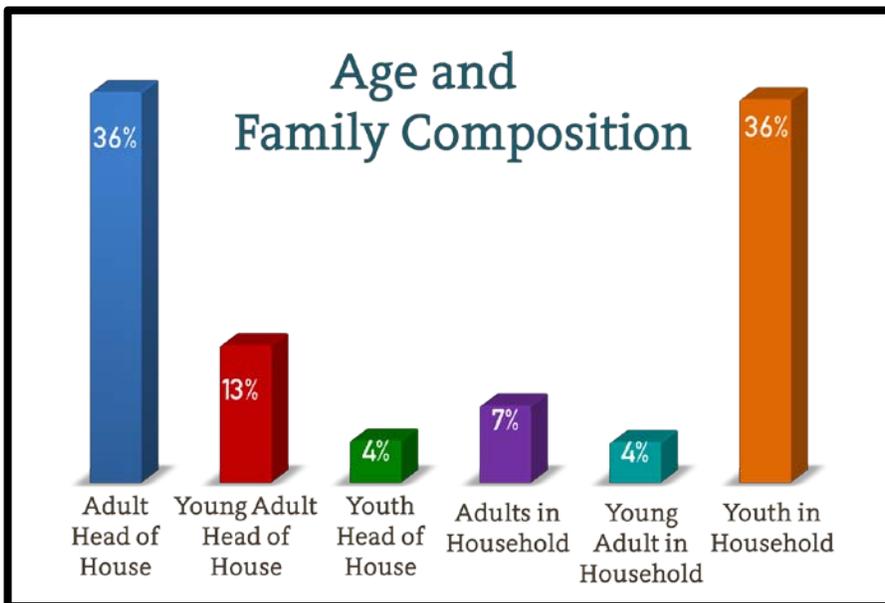


Figure 3: Age & Family Composition (PIT Survey 2012)

By viewing the age breakdown with household structures, the supposition is confirmed that the large majority of youth are situated within family structures.

It is worth noting, however, that local homeless outreach would suggest that the number of minor Youth “Head of Households” is underreported by as much as 3 to 4 times, likely due to trepidation of runaway youth of being returned into an environment they fled from.^{viii}

Gender

When viewing gender, males are somewhat overrepresented in the literally homeless population.

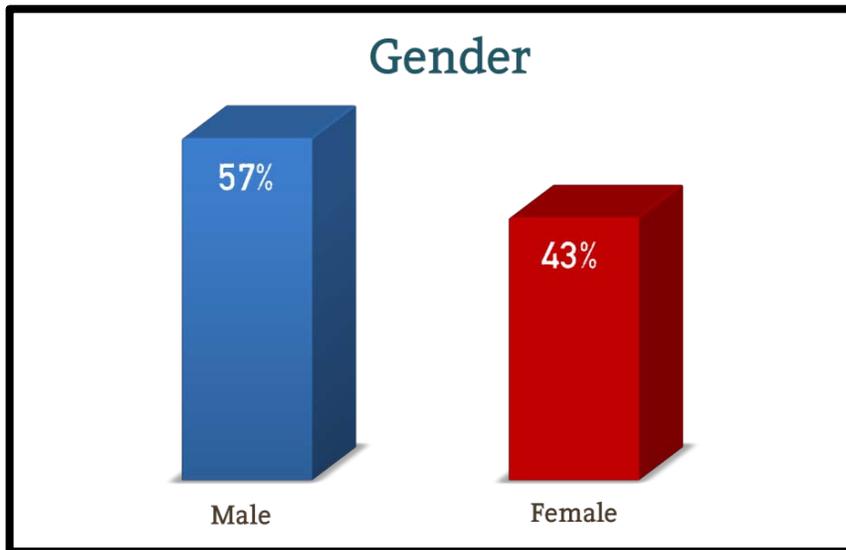


Figure 4: Gender (PIT Survey 2012)

However, if we then compare across the literally homeless and precariously housed, there emerges distinctive differences in the expressions of homelessness between men and women.

In comparing stays, it is remarkable that men are highly overrepresented in more visible forms of homelessness, such as staying outside or in shelters. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to stay with friends and family by a very

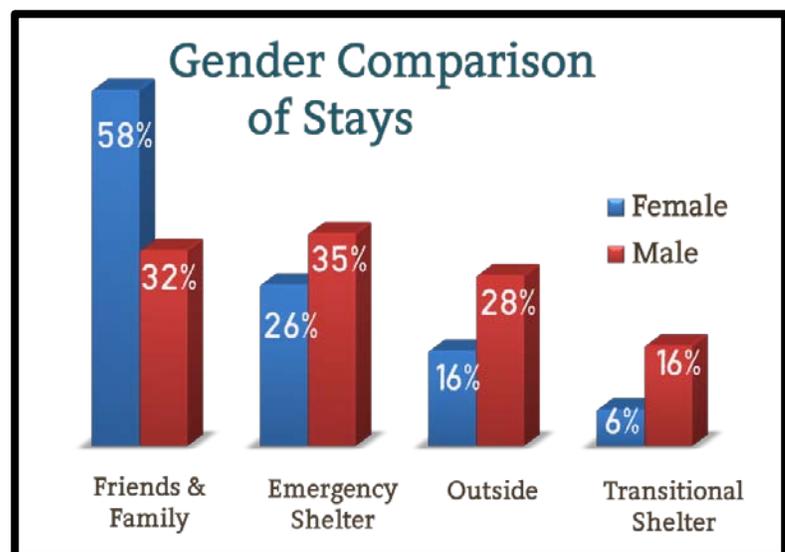


Figure 5: Gender & Facility Stays (PIT Survey 2012)

large margin. This perhaps suggests differences in the level of social capital available to each gender when experiencing homelessness.

Ethnic

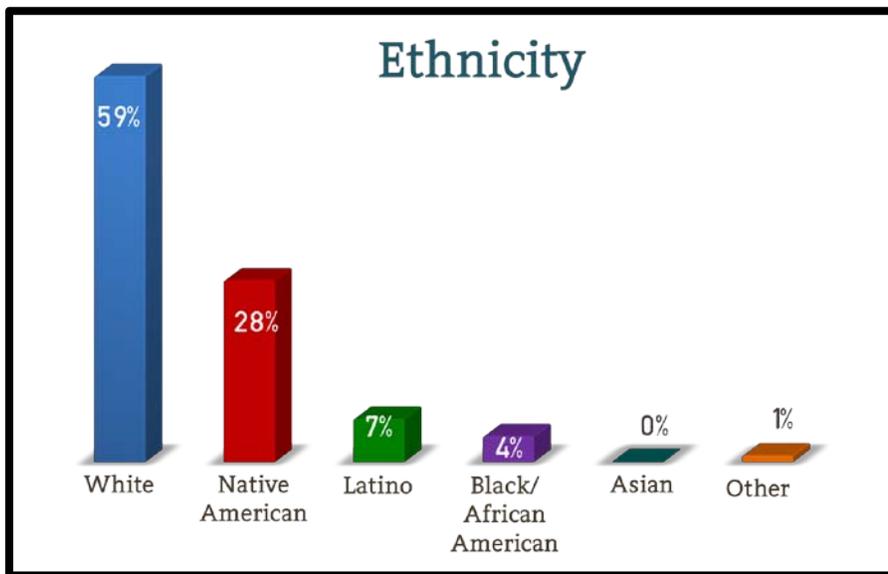


Figure 6: Ethnicity (Point-in-Time Survey 2012)

Much like the other demographic features, once again in the area of race and ethnicity we find stark contrasts.

Racial minorities find themselves extremely over-

represented, with Native Americans forming less than 4% of the general population of the Billings metro area, but with a 700% greater share among the homeless. Likewise, African Americans form just 0.6% of the population, being overrepresented by almost 700% as well. Latino figures are also distorted, although comparative less so in that the 7% of homeless persons who identify as Hispanic/Latino is slightly less than twice the 4.5% figure within the general population.

ⁱ National Alliance to End Homelessness, "About Homelessness." 2012

http://www.endhomelessness.org/section/about_homelessness/snapshot_of_homelessness

ⁱⁱ National Alliance to End Homelessness, "What is a Continuum of Care," 2012.

<http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/1744>

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing: Defining “Homeless”; Final Rule; 76 Federal Register 233 (5 December 2011), pp. 75994-76019.
http://www.hudhre.info/documents/HEARTH_HomelessDefinition_FinalRule.pdf
- ^{iv} McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001 42 USC § 11301.
- ^v Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing: Defining “Homeless” Final Rule.
- ^{vi} U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census; National Alliance to End Homelessness, “Prevalence of Homelessness”, 2009,
http://www.endhomelessness.org/files/2490_file_Geography_of_Homelessness_Part_2.pdf
- ^{vii} National Alliance to End Homelessness, “The State of Homelessness in America 2012”
http://www.endhomelessness.org/files/4361_file_FINAL_The_State_of_Homelessness_in_America_2012.pdf
- ^{viii} Sheri Boelter, Tumbleweed Program Outreach, May 4 2012.