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The Aging of Contemporary Homelessness

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Homelessness is currently at a demographic crossroad. This presents a unique opportunity for hastening its demise. In the thirty years since homelessness first manifested itself in American cities in its contemporary form, it has ascended to one of the most prominent American social problems. Despite the current push by advocacy organizations to end homelessness, many expect it will always be with us. In its longevity, however, lies the potential for its decline, provided we do not repeat this cycle with a new generation of homeless.

Homelessness looked different four decades ago: skid row scenes populated with old, alcoholic men. These were vestiges of the depression-era homeless, who had remained down and out through the decades of prosperity that followed World War II. As researchers noted the passing of this urban archetype, the present generation of homeless emerged in the early 1980s. This "new" homelessness stood at odds with skid row stereotypes. The predominant demographic groups in the new homeless population were able-bodied young men, mostly black, and young women with their children. A new generation of destitute poverty had burst forth, comprised of people primarily born between 1954 and 1967, who had the misfortune of coming of age during the double-dip recessions of the late 70s and early 80s.

Data from twenty-two years of New York City shelter records and from the last three decennial census enumerations show a distinct cohort effect among the single adult homeless population. In Figure 1, the age distribution of all single adults who stayed in New York City shelters has shifted to the right over time. The peak age frequencies, which were between 28 through 33 in 1988, have progressed to ages 46 through 51 in 2010. The single adult homeless population here consists primarily of a male, mostly minority cohort born between 1959 and 1964, the last years of the baby boom generation.

This figure does not include adults in homeless families. In contrast to their unaccompanied counterparts, the ages of heads of NYC homeless families have remained unchanged over time with a modal age in the early 20's (data not shown in Figure 1). This suggests that heads of families experience

homelessness in conjunction with the difficulties of raising young children in poverty, and that lasting

exits occur as children get older. These dynamics deserve their own assessment, however, and the

focus here is on homeless adults without children.

The age distributions of the homeless population are also available from the last three decennial

Census enumerations, and gauging the proportions of homelessness among age groups in the overall

U.S. population provides the "relative risk" for each age group. Relative risk shows the degree to which

a particular subgroup is at risk for experiencing an event as compared to the risk for the remaining

population. Because the Census Bureau does not differentiate between whether a person is homeless

as an individual or with a family, we look here only at males, who, when they experience homelessness,

overwhelmingly do so as individuals. In a pattern similar to Figure 1, Figure 2 shows a moving bulge in

the ages with peak relative risk. In the 1990 Census enumeration, those aged between 34 and 36 had

over one and a half times the relative risk for homelessness as the rest of the U.S. population (RR=1.6).

In subsequent enumerations, the age groups with the highest relative risks for homelessness shifted to

40 to 42 (RR=1.7) in 2000, and then to 49 to 51 (RR=2.0) in 2010.

A confluence of factors potentially explains this trend. This late baby boom cohort faced

tightened housing and labor market conditions as they came of age in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Depressed wages for unskilled workers, higher rates of youth and young adult unemployment, and rising

rental housing costs have raised the risk for housing and labor market problems for the most

disadvantaged members of this cohort. Back-to-back recessions in the late 1970s and early 1980s

exacerbated the problem. Among the most disadvantaged – disproportionately low-income, minority,

urban youth – many never developed ties to the formal labor market and instead would spend much of

their adult lives cycling between unemployment, working in the informal economy, and occasional stints

in menial, low-paying jobs. Time spent in drug treatment and incarceration further alienated many

from the labor market and from their families. This expanding pool of poor young adults made new

demands upon the social welfare system just as cutbacks to the welfare state were weakening the safety net. Increased demands on overwhelmed anti-poverty, child welfare, and homeless services systems went unanswered. Only the corrections system rose to meet the demand.

Today, the bulk of this cohort is in their early fifties. Given a life expectancy of sixty-four for homeless single men,this cohort is now approaching premature old age. The cohort that has been the mainstay of the single adult homeless population since the 1980s will soon fade into history but not before medical issues related to aging ensure that they will have a one last profound impact on the social welfare system.

Predictions of a concomitant decline in the single adult homeless population may be premature. Data from New York City (Figure 1) indicates that a new, young single adult cohort is emerging among the homeless population. Starting in 2000, and becoming more visible in subsequent years, is a bump among the groups in the 22 to 30 age range that suggests a new generation of homelessness. The large number of youths who grew up under the jurisdiction of the foster care and the juvenile justice systems are particularly at risk. New veterans returning to civilian life after tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan have also been a substantial source of young adult homelessness, with recent data indicating that as many as 13,000 young veterans became homeless in 2011. The nation's prison population has dropped over the past two years, the first such decline since the 1970s. If this decline continues, it stands to return large numbers of incarcerated persons back into a society for which they are poorly prepared. All these trends play against a backdrop of sustained unemployment rates of nearly 30% among young minority adults, a threshold not seen since the mid-1980s.

If we are determined to end homelessness among single adults, each end of this age distribution calls for different policy responses. On the older end, the needs of an aging homeless population fit well with the current policy emphasis on ending homelessness through the greater availability of permanent supportive housing. This approach combines affordable housing with support services (while bypassing

the traditional shelter system) to place homeless people directly from the streets into their own homes. Supportive housing has been successful in housing the most chronic and recalcitrant among the homeless population (with one-year tenant retention rates typically exceeding 85%), and has been a key reason why, despite the worst recession in decades, the number of chronic homeless in the U.S. has declined by a third since 2005 to 110,000.

Key to countering this budding trend of homelessness among the young is the development of a range of prevention initiatives that target at-risk populations. Such approaches include the Homebase program in New York City, which provides enough short-term emergency assistance to permit families on the verge of homelessness to weather their housing crises. Other approaches are broader and more "upstream." These include initiatives that provide ongoing housing, financial and educational support for young adults who age out of foster care placements; and veterans programs that provide a range of supports for veterans and their families in their transition from military life. But more broadly based and systematic programs that target issues such as youth unemployment and prison reentry on a large scale need to be put into place if we are to effectively prevent another generation of homeless.

Figure 1 - Proportional age distribution of single adults in New York City shelters: 1988-2010
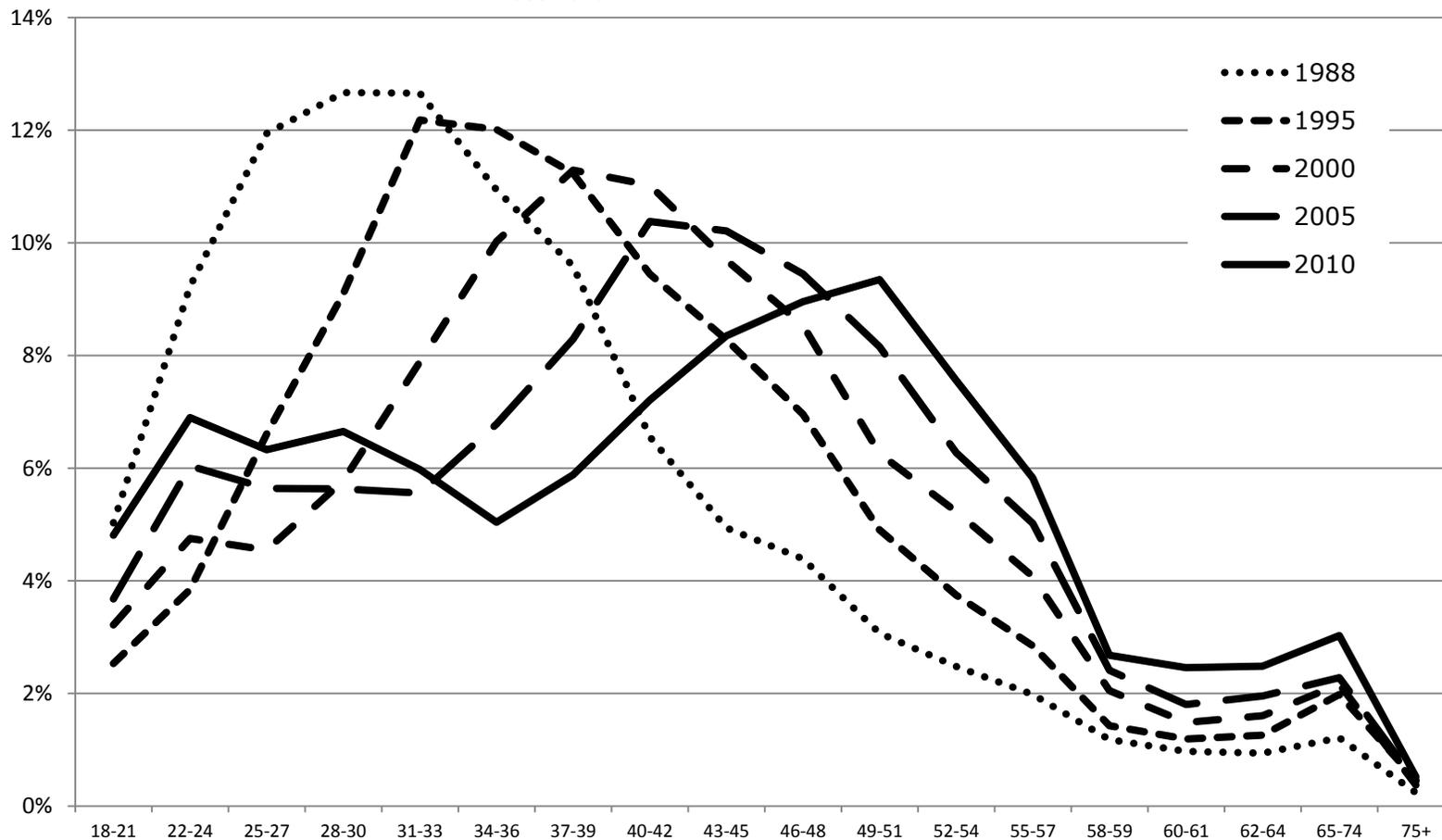
Figure 2 - Relative risk, by age, for shelter use among adult males in US: 1990, 2000 and 2010 (US Census)