



The PRISM Project Survey Mainstream Resources

The term "mainstream resources" is used to describe the variety of federal, state, and local government benefit and assistance programs specifically designed to assist low-income persons and other disadvantaged groups. They include: Supplemental Security Income (SSI); Social Security Disability Income (SSDI); Food Stamps; Veteran's Benefits; Medicaid; and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

In recent years, research conducted by the Homeless Alliance of Western New York has revealed some startling results regarding the use of mainstream resources among homeless populations. In 2003, for example, fewer than twenty percent of clients entering shelters received SSI or TANF. Less than thirty percent received Medicaid and/or Food Stamps, while more than half of clients entered shelters without any financial resources at all.

Those leaving shelter programs did not fare much better with regard to mainstream benefits. Alliance research suggests that only 11% of clients leaving shelter received SSI, 35% accessed TANF, 43% received Medicaid, and 37% obtained food stamps. While the number of individuals with no financial benefits was greatly reduced, some 38% of shelter clients left these facilities without any resources. Their lack of financial support greatly increases their chances of returning to a homeless situation.

Specific client data from the 2004 PRISM Project survey seems to corroborate these earlier findings. Shelter participants indicated more limited use of mainstream resources. Among them, respondents mentioned Food Stamps (56%), TANF (22%), SSI (16%), SSDI (12%), and Veterans Benefits (5%). Meanwhile, respondents who were located in soup kitchens, food pantries, and other service sites specifically mentioned use of SSI/SSD (36%), TANF (28%), and Veterans Benefits (5%).

Importantly, the data also suggests a mild "protective" effect for those individuals who are able to secure mainstream resources. Individuals who received governmental supports were less likely to be homeless at the time of the survey and had fewer instances of homelessness over the past three years. Perhaps, more importantly, the median income for persons receiving mainstream resources was \$587 per month. While this figure is still below the federal poverty threshold, it is more than double the income of those who had not secured this assistance.

Advocates note that persons who lack financial resources or do not have a connection to government supports are at greater risk for becoming homeless. Even with mainstream resources in place, shelter clients still face barriers to their return to self sufficiency. Data collected by the Homeless Alliance of WNY clearly documents the importance of connecting clients to mainstream governmental assistance. Targeted client outreach and greater collaboration between service providers and benefit programs is needed to ensure that individuals are aware of and receive the assistance for which they are eligible. In addition, advocacy at a local, state, and federal level is needed to guarantee continued funding for these and other important government programs which assistance the poor.