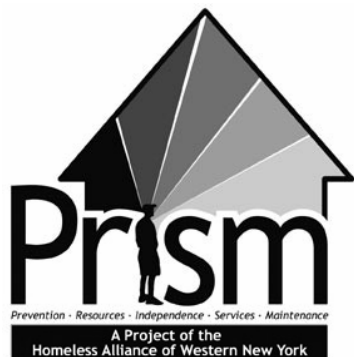


Preliminary PRISM Project Survey Results



February 2005

Homeless Alliance of Western New York
2211 Main Street
Buffalo, NY 14214
Phone: (716) 853-1101
www.wnyhomeless.org

Background

In 2000, the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) began an ambitious campaign to end homelessness in the United States within ten years. Recognizing unprecedented levels of homelessness, the organization emphasized the role that effective community planning efforts could play in reducing the number of homeless persons to zero. At the same time, NAEH also began extensive outreach to various public, private, and nonprofit organizations in order to raise awareness and build necessary political will to address the issue of homelessness.

The NAEH efforts began to pay off when they caught the attention of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the newly re-formed Interagency Council on Homelessness. These entities quickly adopted the ten-year planning strategy in an effort to assist a specific subpopulation of the homeless known as the chronic or long-term homeless. Likewise, the Bush Administration and the U.S. Conference of Mayors set a national goal of ending chronic or long-term homelessness by 2012 and strongly encouraged the development of ten year plans in cities, counties, and states across the country.

By-mid 2004, more than 120 U.S. locations had committed to developing their own ten-year plans while twenty-five sites had commenced with plan implementation. The planning process reportedly resulted in greater interest in the issue of homelessness in cities and communities across the county. However, investigation of these plans revealed that most were written by persons with only limited understanding of homeless or poverty issues who did specifically include current and formerly homeless persons in the planning process (See: A Review of National Ten Year Plans to End Homelessness). In addition, most communities used older data on homelessness instead of gaining an understanding of current issues.

In the fall of 2003, the Homeless Alliance of Western New York (formerly the Erie County Commission on Homelessness) decided to take on a ten-year planning process within Buffalo and Erie County using a highly innovative strategy to address these concerns. Already tasked with coordinating homeless services in the area, the Homeless Alliance felt it was critically important that the experiences of homeless persons directly inform the creation of the new plan. Likewise, the group felt that homeless advocates and service providers should play a large role in shaping the community's future direction. To that end, the Alliance launched a large-scale effort including a cross-sectional survey of at-risk, current, and formerly homeless individuals as part of its PRISM Project. An overview of the PRISM Project and preliminary results from the survey are provided in the document that follows.

PRISM Project Overview

The PRISM Project draws on the Homeless Alliance of WNY's active membership of over sixty organizations as well as various community members to develop and

implement a plan to end chronic or long-term homelessness in Buffalo and Erie County. The project is framed around five overarching goals as identified within the national literature on homelessness:

- 1.) **PREVENTION** - Expand the range and availability of homeless prevention strategies, increase immediate accessibility, and improve long-term effectiveness in order to reduce the number of chronically homeless individuals in our community.
- 2.) **RESOURCES** - Increase awareness of and linkages to mainstream and community resources including: Medicaid, Child Health Insurance Programs, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Food Stamps, Social Security Insurance, and Veterans Health Care.
- 3.) **INDEPENDENCE THROUGH HOUSING** - Expand the availability of affordable permanent housing for chronically homeless individuals by adopting a “Housing First” philosophy.
- 4.) **SERVICES** - Improve service provision throughout the homeless continuum of care by increasing relationships among homeless housing and service providers.
- 5.) **MAINTENANCE** – Improved follow-up and wrap-around assistance to ensure self-sufficiency.

The above-stated goals will require a substantial re-orientation of the homeless service delivery system, as well as an evaluation of the use of current resources and significant cross-system collaboration. To this end, the Homeless Alliance will use local data and work with community members to develop specific action plans that detail short-term implementation strategies and identify needed changes to the current homeless continuum of care. These action plans will form the basis of Erie County’s strategy to end chronic or long-term homelessness and will make it possible to identify what additional services or linkages are needed to reduce the number of homeless individuals living on the streets or in emergency shelters in Western New York.

Collaboration is a vital part of this strategy. The Homeless Alliance maintains a membership of over sixty local organizations. Importantly, these member agencies represent governmental, business, foundation, housing, and service provider interests from geographic areas throughout Erie County. Additionally, collaborators will offer specific expertise regarding homeless subpopulations including the mentally ill, substance abusers, dually diagnosed individuals, victims of domestic violence, youth, veterans, and persons with HIV/AIDS. Drawing on their understanding of these subpopulations as well as input from consumers and the larger community, the Alliance will develop plans that will more adequately serve those in most need.

The PRISM Project Survey

To better understand the needs and use of services among at risk, current, and formerly homeless individuals, the Homeless Alliance conducted a two-tiered community survey on September 22nd 2004. As part of the survey planning process, Alliance staff worked with members and various community resources to scout key locations, develop survey questions and protocols, and to secure volunteers.

Recognizing that individuals at risk for homelessness accessed a variety of community services, the team developed a short form survey to be implemented at area soup kitchens, food pantries, drop-in and support centers, resource centers, and service provider sites. The three page short form instrument enabled the Alliance to obtain information on the demographics, education, income, homeless status, need for services, and use of local programming among this group.

In addition, a long form was also created to capture information from persons who were housed within the local emergency shelter network. This longer and more extensive survey included questions on personal characteristics, education and employment, income, physical and mental health, substance use, other disabling conditions, use of mainstream resources, and care networks. This twenty minute survey allowed the Alliance staff to gain a deeper understanding of persons being served in the local community.

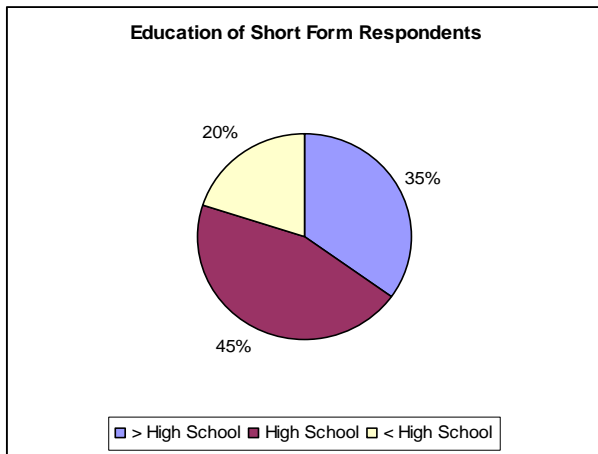
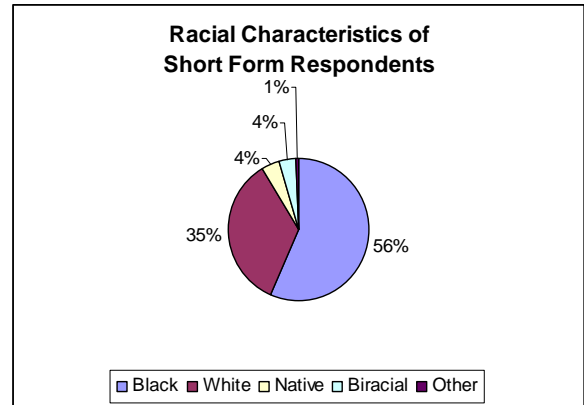
Prior to entering the field, the effort's 165 volunteers were given special training on the survey instrument as well as information about homeless populations and poverty in the United States more generally. Volunteers approached individuals at the various community sites and inquired about their willingness to participate in the survey. Importantly, potential respondents were informed that their information would be completely confidential and no one outside the study team would have access to it. Likewise, respondents were told that their access to services would not be compromised if they decided not to participate in the survey. Participants had the option to complete the survey themselves, to read along, or to have the volunteer read the document to them. Respondents were compensated for their valuable time and information. They were also given a pocket resource card identifying a variety of services available in the local community.

Short Form Results

As noted above, the Homeless Alliance of WNY team used a short form instrument to learn about the characteristics of individuals using emergency feeding and low-income service programs. Short form surveys were conducted at several community locations including soup kitchens, food pantries, drop-in and support centers, and other service provider sites. In total, 876 individuals responded to the short form survey. When duplicated responses were eliminated, the total number of valid cases was 781.

Socio-Demographics

The vast majority of short form respondents were males (74%), with most ranging between the ages of 30 and 55 years of age. To learn about the racial characteristics of survey respondents, the study included the race question used in the 2000 Census. More than half of short form survey respondents self-identified as black (57%), with thirty-five percent identifying as white, four percent identifying as bi-racial, four percent identifying as Native American, and less than one percent identifying as Asian or other. Among these participants, nearly nine percent indicated that they were of Hispanic origin.



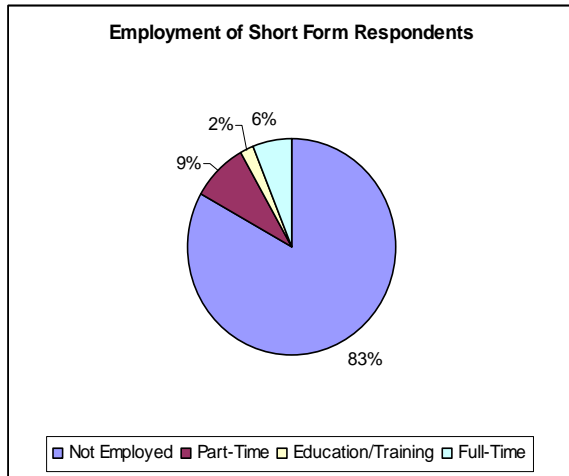
Just over one-third of all short form respondents did not have a high school diploma or general education equivalent. An additional forty-five percent of respondents completed only high school. One out of five respondents had some college education with only four percent securing a Bachelor or Professional Degree. One in ten respondents was in school or job training at the time of the survey. A number of respondents indicated that they were unable to secure what they termed a “decent” job because of their education.

Twenty percent of all short form respondents served in the United States military. Among them, nearly all were eligible to receive Veterans Benefits (92%). When compared to their non-veteran counterparts, veterans were no more or less likely to be employed nor did they have significant differences in their service need or use. However, veterans were more likely to report a mental or emotional disability compared to other survey participants.

Family Relationships

Sixty percent of all respondents indicated that they were single and had never married. Eighteen percent of respondents stated that they had been divorced and an additional twelve percent were separated or widowed. Sixty percent of all respondents have children, with more than half of all responding parents having two children or less. Seventy-six percent of women and fifty-seven percent of men interviewed had children.

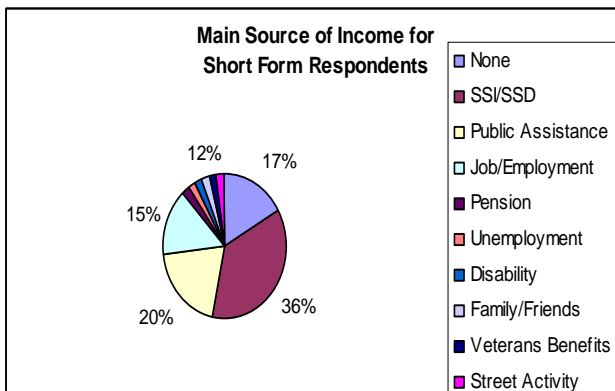
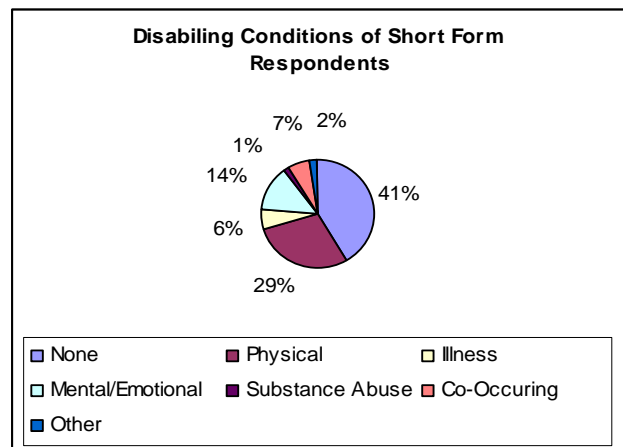
Employment, Disability Status, and Income



Turning to employment, the majority of short form respondents (83%) indicated that they were not employed at the time of the survey. Among those who specified a primary reason for their lack of employment, most suggested that they had a disability or injury (42%). An additional twenty percent mentioned that they faced problems finding work. Other respondents indicated that they were not seeking employment because of: family or personal reasons (10%); use of mainstream resources (9%); recent unemployment (5%); a lack of skills or training (4%); or current alcohol or drug treatment (3%).

For those respondents who were employed, only one in twenty respondents held a full-time position. Among them, males were more likely to be employed and to hold full-time, non-seasonal positions compared to females. Most respondents indicated that they held part-time or temporary positions (82%).

More than half of all respondents (59%) indicated that they had a disabling condition that limited their ability to work or perform daily activities. About a third of respondents indicated that this disability was physical in nature, while fourteen percent stated that their disability was mental or emotional. Other respondents cited substance abuse, homelessness, and health concerns. Very few persons with disabling conditions (less than 3%) indicated that they held employment at the time of the survey.



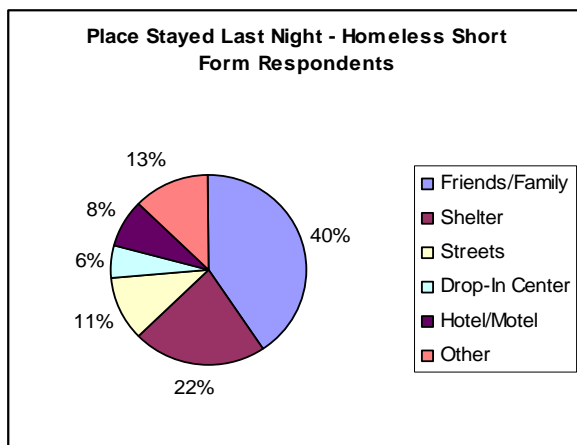
With regard to income, the median monthly income of all respondents was \$500. However, the lowest twenty-five percent had a median income of \$178 per month. Seventeen percent of respondents indicated that they had no income. Only seven percent of respondents had an income greater than \$1000 per month. Sixty percent of all respondents cited some

form of mainstream resource as their primary income.

Looking at the use of mainstream resources, short form respondents specifically mentioned use of SSI/SSD (36%), public assistance or TANF (20%), unemployment (2%), disability (2%), and veterans benefits (2%). Other respondents relied on pensions or retirement accounts, assistance from family and friends, or street activity for monthly income. Nearly half of all employed women said their primary source of income was not their job.

Homelessness

Roughly sixty percent of short form respondents indicated that they had been without a place to stay in their lifetime. Sixty-five percent stated that they had stayed with friends and family because they were homeless.



At the time of the survey, forty percent of short form respondents were homeless. Most of these individuals (41%) had stayed with friends and family the night before the survey but some stayed in shelters (22%), on the streets (11%), at the local drop-in center (6%), or in a hotel or motel (8%). Thirteen percent stayed in other locations included parks, benches, bridges, bus and subway stations, and sheds. Forty-three percent of homeless individuals stated that this was their first experience.

While only nine percent of respondents had family staying with them at the time of the survey, seventy percent of homeless women and fifty percent of homeless men indicated that they had children. Sixty-seven percent of those unemployed were currently homeless. In contrast, forty percent of those employed were homeless. Homeless respondents had a median income of \$200. They were also more likely to be in part-time or temporary positions.

Of the total short form respondent population, only one-fifth had never been homeless. Nearly half of the respondents had been homeless in their lifetime although they were not homeless at the time of the study. One tenth of the respondent pool had been homeless for over one year. Ninety-two percent of homeless respondents had been homeless more than one time.

Chronic or Long-Term Homelessness

In order to meet the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) criteria for chronic or long-term homelessness respondents had to be homeless for one year or more or have four episodes of homelessness in a three year period. In addition, the individual must have a disabling condition that limits their ability to work or

to perform activities. In total, eight percent of all male respondents and six percent of all female respondents met this stringent criterion.

Forty percent of long-term homeless individuals self-identified themselves as white. Another forty percent of this group indicated their racial category as black. This group constitutes ten percent of all white respondents and six percent of all black respondents. In addition, fifteen percent of all Native American respondents could be categorized as long-term homeless.

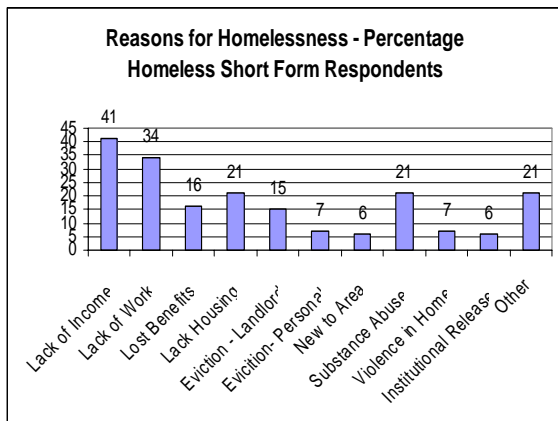
Some forty percent of long-term homeless individuals did not graduate high school. This is in sharp contrast with the fact that 85% of Americans twenty-five years of age or older have completed high school. Seventeen percent of long-term homeless individuals have some level of post-high school education while 53% of the general population has at least some college. About twenty-five percent of long-term homeless respondents served in the U.S. military.

Eight percent of the long-term homeless population surveyed held employment. Only one of these individuals indicated they had full-time employment. Roughly half of all long-term homeless individuals (48%) indicated that they were unable to work due to their disability. They were also more likely to state that they were unemployed because of a physical disability.

While long-term homeless individuals were similar to other homeless population with regard to reasons for homelessness, they more commonly described a lack of affordable housing as a reason for their continued homelessness. They also more commonly needed and used mental health services and discussed the need for transitional living opportunities.

Reasons for Homelessness

Lack of income was the most commonly cited reason for homelessness among current and formerly homeless respondents. Forty-one percent of these respondents described their lack of income as one of the major factors contributing to their situation. Lack of

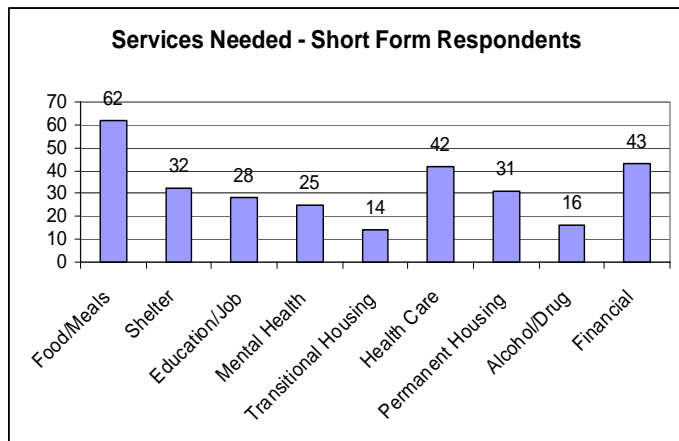


work (34%), lack of affordable housing (21%), substance abuse (21%), and loss of benefits (16%) rounded out the top five reasons given for homelessness followed closely by eviction by a landlord or bank(15%), eviction by friends or family (7%), violence in the home (7%), or institutional release (6%). Notably, respondents could select more than one reason for homelessness. Respondents also described other reasons including health-related issues, fire or disaster, loss of a relationship, travel/transportation, and lack of work skills.

Respondents who were homeless for the first time more commonly cited loss of work as a reason for their homelessness compared to those who had been homeless before. In addition, those individuals who were homeless two or more times more commonly discussed their lack of affordable housing. Persons who experienced institutional release were more likely to be homeless multiple times compared to other homeless groups. The majority of respondents have always lived in Erie County.

Services Needed and Used

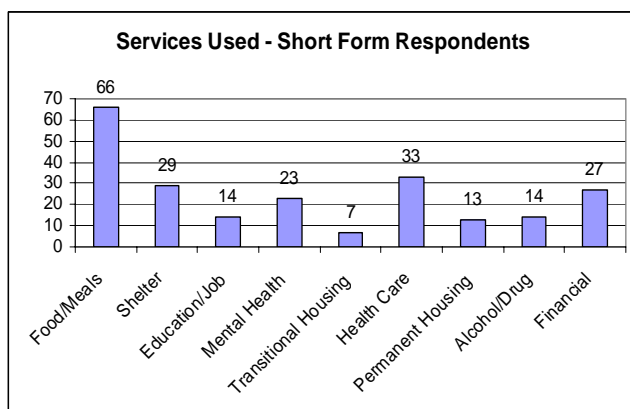
Respondents were asked to identify services they felt they needed over the past year. They were able to choose multiple need areas. The most commonly cited service need was food/meals (62%) followed by financial assistance (43%), health care (42%), emergency shelter (32%), permanent housing (31%), education or job training (28%), mental health services (25%), alcohol and drug services (16%), and transitional housing (14%).



Respondents also identified needs in several other service areas including transportation; employment placement; case management; legal services; dental care; clothing; self-help; religious or spiritual guidance; furniture; help with utilities; veterans assistance; and help with relationships.

Those with full-time jobs were less interested in emergency shelter services compared to other groups. In addition, the percentage of unemployed respondents that indicated a need for mental health services was almost twice that of employed respondents. However, there was no stated difference in the need for financial assistance among employed or unemployed respondents.

There are rather dramatic differences between services respondents felt they needed and services they reported to use.



The most commonly cited service used was food/meals (66%) followed by health care (33%), emergency shelter (29%), financial assistance (28%), mental health services (23%), alcohol and drug services (14%), permanent housing (13%), education or job training (13%), and transitional housing (7%). In addition, several respondents also discussed their use of Crisis Services, HEAP, and legal service programming.

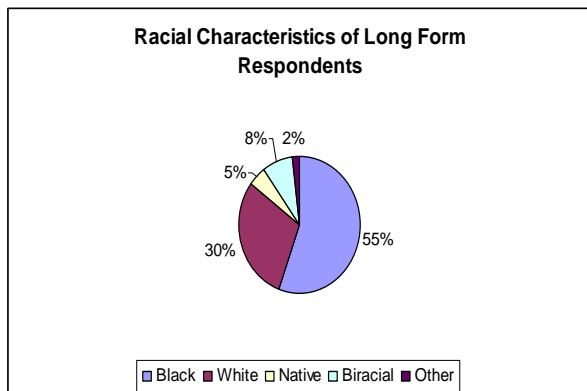
Comparing the aggregated differences between services needed and services used gives us some insight into gaps in current services. For example, though 43% of participants said that they needed financial assistance, only 27% of respondents received it.

The largest percentage gaps between services needed and services used were found in the areas of permanent housing, financial services, education and job training, transitional housing, and health care. Based on comments made by survey respondents, it is clear that participants faced difficulties accessing these needed services. They were unsure where to go to receive assistance or did not know current services existed in the community. Most respondents felt they were able to access food and meals, emergency shelter, mental health care, and substance abuse services. This information is only available in the aggregate at this time. More extensive information will be released in the weeks and months to come.

Long Form Results

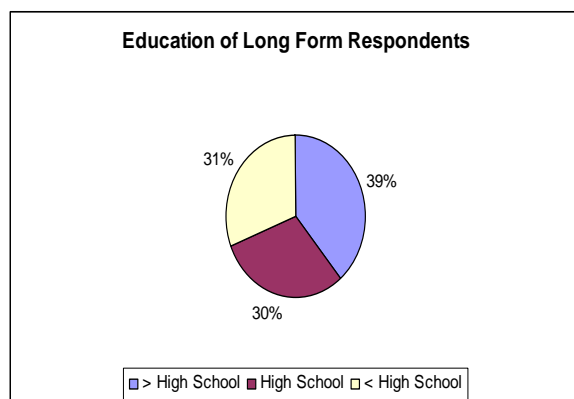
To better understand the characteristics of individuals using emergency housing programs, the Homeless Alliance of WNY team conducting long form interviews at several area shelters including Alcohol and Drug Dependency Services, City Mission, Compass House, Cornerstone Manor, Community Services for Developmentally Disabled, The Franciscan Center, The Salvation Army, and Transitional Services, Inc. In total, 124 individuals responded to the long-form survey.

Socio-Demographics



The plurality of long-form respondents were males (56%). More than half of long-form survey respondents self-identified as black (55%), with thirty percent identifying as white, eight percent identifying as bi-racial, five percent identifying as Native American, and two percent identifying as Asian or other. Among these participants, nearly twenty percent indicated that they were of Hispanic origin.

Thirty-nine percent of all long-form respondents did not have a high school diploma or general education equivalent. Just over thirty percent of respondents completed only high school. Twenty-three percent has some college education and an additional eight percent secured a Bachelor or Professional Degree.



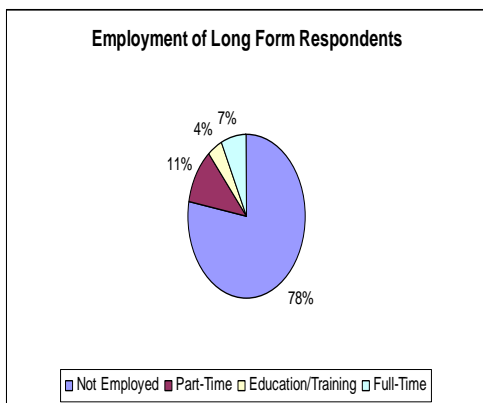
Thirteen percent of all long-form respondents served in the United States military. Among them, nearly all were eligible to receive Veterans Benefits (93.8%).

Family Relationships

Sixty-three percent of all respondents indicated that they had never married. Fifteen percent of respondents stated that they had been divorced, and an additional thirteen percent were separated or widowed. Two-thirds of all respondents have children, with more than half of all responding parents having three children or less.

Eight percent of respondents had family staying with them. However, the vast majority of respondents (75%) indicated that their family members who were not with them in the shelter system. Most of these individuals (especially children) were staying with other relatives or in their own households. There are special concerns about risk for homelessness among these children and other family members.

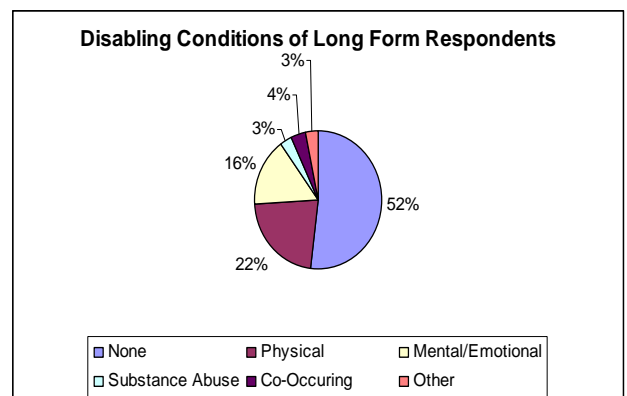
Employment, Disability Status, and Income



Turning to employment, the majority of long-form respondents (77%) indicated that they were not employed at the time of the survey. Among those who specified a primary reason for their lack of employment, most suggested that they had a disability or injury (44%). An additional twenty-four percent mentioned that they faced problems finding work. Other respondents indicated that they were not seeking employment because of family or personal reasons (11%) or were recently unemployed (13%). In addition, some emergency facilities do not allow

clients to work while receiving services (e.g., providers offering mental health or substance abuse treatment).

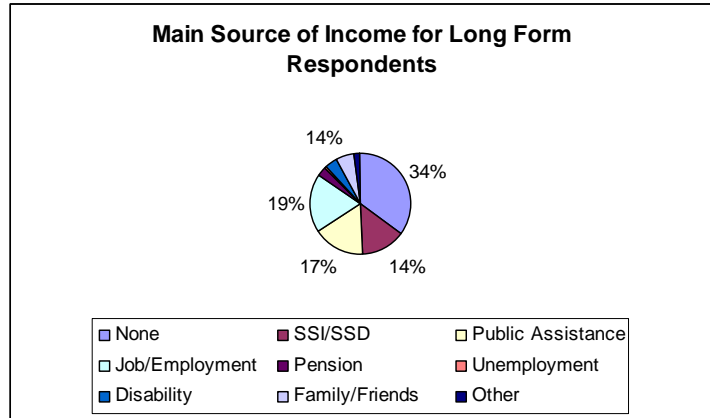
For those respondents who were employed, only seven percent of respondents held a full time position. Among them, males were more likely to be employed and to hold full-time, non-seasonal positions compared to females. Most respondents indicated that they worked part-time or temporary positions (75%).



Just under half of all respondents (48%) indicated that they had a condition that limited their ability to work or perform daily activities.

Among them, twenty-two percent of respondents indicated that they had a physical disability while sixteen percent indicated that their disability was mental or emotional in nature. Others respondents cited substance abuse or co-occurring issues.

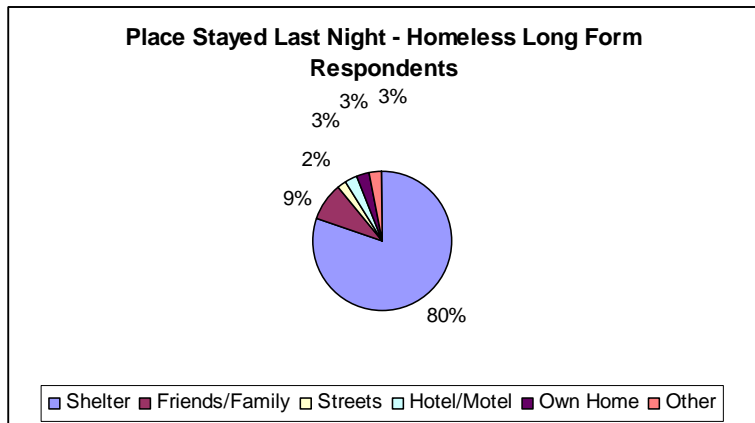
With regard to income, the median monthly income of all long-form respondents was \$303. Thirty-four percent of respondents indicated that they had no income. Only nine percent of respondents had an income greater than \$1000 per month. Sixty percent of all respondents cited some form of mainstream resource as their primary income. Among them, respondents mentioned



job/employment (19%), SSI/SSD (14%), public assistance or TANF (17%), support from friends and family (6%), disability (4%), and unemployment (1%). Other respondents relied on pensions or retirement accounts or other activities for monthly income.

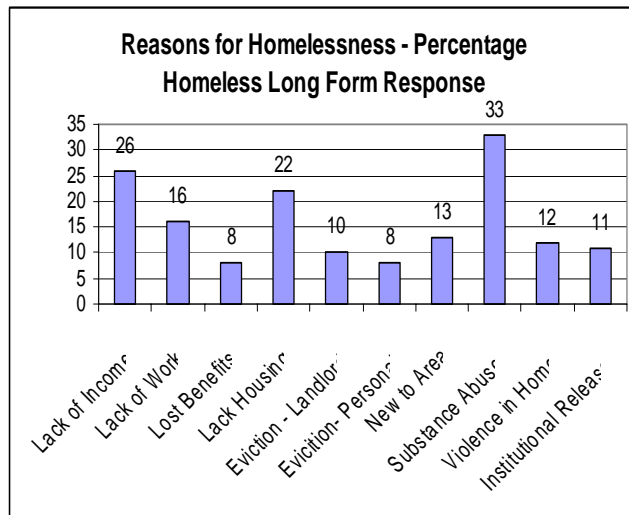
Homelessness

The majority of respondents indicated that they had resided in a shelter the night before the survey (80%). The remaining twenty-percent of respondents indicated that they had stayed on the streets, at the local drop-in center, at their own homes, and with friends and family. Other locations also included cars, parks, benches, bridges, bus and subway stations, and sheds.



At the time of the survey, fifty-three percent of long-form respondents were homeless for the first time. Twenty-nine percent of respondents had been homeless two times while seven percent had been homeless three times. Seven percent of respondents indicated that they had been homeless four or more times in a three year period which is one of the key criteria for chronic or long-term homelessness.

Reasons for Homelessness

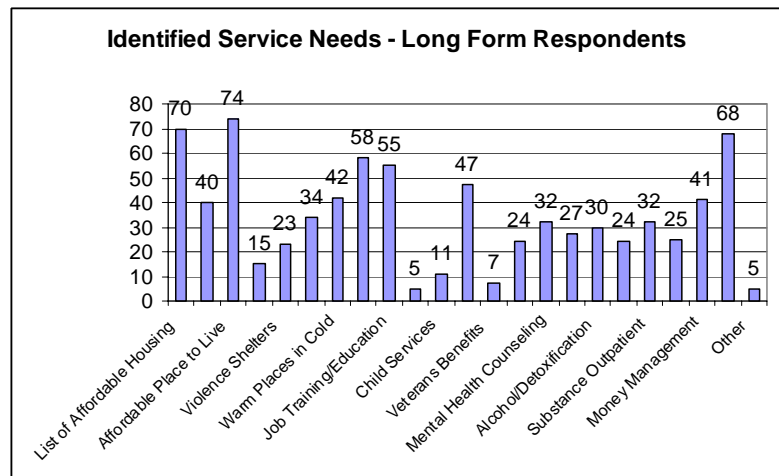


Alcohol and drug abuse was the most commonly cited reasons for homelessness among respondents. Thirty-three percent of respondents described their addiction as one of the major factors contributing to their situation. Meanwhile, lack of income (26%), lack of affordable housing (22%), lack of work (16%), and violence in the home (14%) rounded out the top five reasons followed closely by eviction by landlord or bank (10%), institutional release (10%), and eviction by friends and family (8%). Respondents could select more than one reason for homelessness.

A number of shelter respondents also indicated that they were new to the area. In fact, only 45% of respondents had always lived in Erie County. In the last year, about 30% of these respondents came to Erie County from outside New York State. An additional 30% came from another part of New York while 12% came from the Mid-Atlantic region.

Services Needed

Respondents were asked to select from a list of services and identify the services they felt they needed. Among these, respondents indicated greatest need for the following housing services: affordable places to live (74%); a list of affordable housing (70%); warm places to go when it gets cold (42%); educational workshops for applying for housing (40%); and places to camp without being harassed (34%);



Regarding support services, respondents indicated that they were interested in help finding a job or employment services (58%); job training/education (55%); assistance applying for benefits (47%); or help with a disability (24%). In addition, forty-one percent of participants sought money management skills and an astounding 68% hoped for more affordable and/or easier to use transportation.

Related to mental illness, some thirty-two percent of respondents indicated a desire of help with a mental health concern (32%), while twenty-seven percent were looking for mental health case management (27%). In the field of substance abuse, thirty percent of respondents sought alcohol or drug detoxification services. Twenty-four percent suggested interest in residential treatment for drug/alcohol. Thirty-two percent indicated a need for outpatient alcohol or drug treatment. Twenty-five percent request assistance with co-occurring substance abuse and mental health issues.

Fewer respondents indicated a desire for shelters for people getting away from family violence or abuse (23%); shelters that accept couples and/or whole families (15%); or help with veterans benefits (7%). Notably, about four percent of respondents sought child care services. However, the study sample was predominately unaccompanied adult males.

Additional information about physical health, mental health, substance abuse, and other disabling conditions will be made available in the weeks and months to come. Likewise, information on the use of emergency feeding, counseling, and other resources will also be accessible on the Homeless Alliance of WNY website (www.wnyhomeless.org).

Conclusions

As these preliminary results illustrate, the PRISM Project survey has provided a wealth of information about the homeless and near-homeless populations in Buffalo and Erie County. One hundred sixty-five volunteers spoke with more than 1,200 persons and learned a great deal about their lives, experiences, and characteristics.

Some of the key findings of the study are identified below along with some suggestions for future examinations.

- ✓ **Need for Education and Job Training:** Over one-third of all short form respondents and thirty-nine percent of long form respondents did not have a high school diploma or GED. In addition, 55% of long form respondents indicated an interest in job training or education opportunities.
- ✓ **Concern for At Risk Individuals:** A large number of homeless or at risk individuals state that they did not live in a home of their own but stayed with family and friends. Additionally, many sheltered individuals did not travel with their family members. This suggests a sizable pool of people who are at high risk of homelessness.
- ✓ **Presence of Disabling Condition Inhibits Ability to Work or Perform Activities:** Fifty-nine percent of short form participants and forty-eight percent of long form respondents indicated that they have a physical, emotional, or other disabling condition that inhibits their ability to work or perform activities. Employment among this group is greatly reduced. Need for disability assistance was also discussed.

- ✓ **Median Incomes Fall Far Short of Poverty Line Incomes:** For short form participants, the median income was \$500 per month while the median income for sheltered individuals was \$303. Thirty-four percent of long form respondents indicated that they had no income.
- ✓ **Use of Mainstream Resources:** Sixty-two percent of short form and sixty percent on long form respondents rely on mainstream resources as their main source of monthly income.
- ✓ **Experience of Homelessness Higher Than Expected Among At-Risk Group:** Sixty percent of short form respondents indicated that they had been without a place of their own in their lifetime. Sixty-five percent indicated that they stayed with friends and family. Forty percent indicated that they were currently homeless. Only 22% of these individuals indicated that they had stayed in a shelter the night before. More outreach work must be done at emergency feeding and service locations.
- ✓ **Long-Term Homeless Identified at Emergency Programs:** One in ten persons accessing emergency feeding and services was homeless for one year or more. Ninety-two percent of currently homeless respondents found at these locations were homeless more than once.
- ✓ **Lack of Income, Work, Affordable Housing, and Benefits Key Reasons for Homelessness:** Most respondents (short or long form) indicated that lack of income was a major reason for their homelessness. Among first-time homeless persons, loss of work was a key factor. For individuals who were homeless two or more times, lack of affordable housing was more commonly discussed.
- ✓ **Disconnect Between Service Need and Service Use:** Among short form respondents, there were fairly dramatic aggregate differences in permanent housing, financial services, education and job training, transitional housing, and health care with regard to services needed and services used. Most respondents felt that they were able to access food and meals, emergency shelter, mental health care, and substance abuse services.
- ✓ **Homeless Persons Express Need for Housing and Services:** Sheltered populations identified greatest need for affordable places to live, lists of affordable housing, warm places to go when it gets cold, educational workshops for applying for housing, and places to camp without being harassed. Access to transportation, job and employment services, assistance with benefits, and job training were also highly sought.

Additional study questions include comparisons between at-risk and homeless individuals, homeless subpopulations, as well as the chronic or long-term homeless; analysis of individual need and use of services, and subgroup analysis on other metrics.