

IOWA'S HOMELESS POPULATION
SUMMARY OF 1999 ESTIMATES AND PROFILE

**A Summary of a Report Prepared
for the State of Iowa
by the University of Iowa
In Cooperation with
The Iowa Department of Education
and Other State Agencies**

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This report may also be obtained at the following internet sites:

[http:// planning.urban.uiowa.edu/homeless](http://planning.urban.uiowa.edu/homeless) OR <http://carrich.urban.uiowa.edu/homeless>

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This study of Iowa's homeless population was commissioned by the Iowa Department of Education and the Iowa Department of Economic Development, and co-ordinated through the Interagency Task Force on Homelessness. As with any such study there are several purposes, including compilation of general educational information, and specific data necessary for program reporting and evaluation by different entities. The primary purposes of the 1999 Homeless Study are:

- **Estimating the size of the homeless and near-homeless population in Iowa in 1999.**
- **Providing a basic demographic profile of the homeless and near-homeless populations.**
- **Investigating the causes of homelessness.**
- **Investigating service providers' perceptions of causes, barriers and trends in the number served.**
- **Providing state agencies with sufficient current information to re-evaluate programs.**

This summary of the study reports on the major findings, but readers are referred to the full report (available at [http:// http://planning.urban.uiowa.edu/homeless](http://planning.urban.uiowa.edu/homeless)) for a more detailed analysis of the problem and explanation of our methodology.

Although there are commonly held perceptions of whom the term homeless includes, a strict definition is necessary for a sound study. The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 (PL 100-77) definition includes any persons living in the situations described below:

- A person without fixed, regular and adequate nighttime shelter;
- A person whose primary night time residence is:
 - A supervised shelter designed to provide temporary accommodations (such as a congregate shelter or transitional housing);
 - A public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping place for human beings (such as a car, camper, abandoned building, barn or street)

The McKinney Act definition has been interpreted more broadly by several agencies,

including the U.S. Department of Education, and the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, to apply to the following classes of people in addition to those listed above:

- Children in runaway shelters or group homes (e.g., homes for abandoned children);
- Children living in state institutions (e.g., awaiting foster home placement) because they have no other home;
- Sick or abandoned children who would be released from the institution (e.g., hospitals) they are living in, if they had another place to go;
- A person or household living doubled-up with family or friends for a temporary period.

This is the expanded definition used in this study, which is consistent with that used in past studies of Iowa's homeless population.

The definition of near-homeless may include a much broader range of situations. Although many impoverished families may be vulnerable to homelessness, a more restricted definition is necessary to identify those who are truly in imminent danger. After much discussion of relevant factors, the purpose of counting this population, and definitions used in other studies, we included the following as "near-homeless":

- A person or household in imminent danger of eviction;
- A person or household in imminent danger of having their utilities disconnected;
- A person or household seeking housing assistance, AND paying more than 50% of their income for housing.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WERE HOMELESS IN IOWA IN 1999?

This study is based on mail back surveys distributed to a total of 2,231 agencies. Surveys requested information on homeless and near-homeless people served during the study period (April 25 to May 8 1999). A series of questions also covered agency perceptions of the major causes of homelessness and barriers to improving services to homeless people. The raw unduplicated counts on which our study is based provide at best a partial "snapshot" of homelessness in Iowa during a two-week period in the Spring of 1999. Point-in-time counts, no matter how comprehensive, all encounter the dilemma of how to extrapolate from a single period to an annual estimate. The response rates (54.7% overall) are reasonable for a mail-back survey, but they are far from perfect. Despite our best efforts to improve response rates, many communities have only partial responses. The volume of non-respondents points to the need to

interpret raw counts with extreme caution.

Table 1 summarizes our estimate of Iowa's homeless population in 1999. These estimates are based on a methodology that extrapolated from the raw unduplicated counts to address the following three questions:

- How do we adjust our point-in-time count to estimate the number of people we can expect were homeless in Iowa in 1999?
- How do we adjust our point-in-time count to account for seasonal variation over the year?
- How do we account for communities reporting zero homeless people?

Appendix A in the full report describes in detail how our methodology accounts for these three issues.

Table 1 distinguishes between adults and children. Overall, we could expect (based on the demographic profile of the people counted during the study period) that children made up just over half Iowa's homeless population in 1999. This is a smaller proportion than that shown in the unduplicated raw count, because reporting periods differed for different agencies. Schools were asked to report information for all homeless children during the 1998 /1999 school year, while shelters and other non-shelter service providers reported information only on individuals served during the two-week study period. Our extrapolation of an annual estimate for the latter group of agencies inflated the study period count based on the individuals they reported (both adults and children). As schools reported data for the entire school year, estimates were adjusted only to account for school districts reporting zero homeless children. Consequently, our annualized estimate could be expected to include a higher proportion of adults than the raw counts on which the study is based. Estimates of homeless and near-homeless people by county, and estimates of homeless and near-homeless school children by school district, are included in the full report.

Table 1: Estimate of Iowa's 1999 Homeless and Near-homeless Population*

	Homeless Individuals		Near-homeless Individuals	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Unduplicated raw counts:				
Children	2,553	59.7	636	65.2
Adults	1,441	33.7	253	25.9
Unknown	284	6.7	87	8.9
Total	4,278		976	
Annualized Estimate:				
Children	9,383	50.5	3,028	41.4
Adults	9,209	49.5	4,278	58.6
Total	18,592		7,306	

* County-level estimates of homeless children and adults are summarized in Figures 1 and 2.

WHO IS HOMELESS IN IOWA?

The estimated count of the homeless suggests that the number of homeless people has remained static over the past several years. In spite of recent economic expansion and record unemployment, a segment of our population remains entrenched in poverty and at risk of losing their housing if there is a family crisis. Homelessness exists in rural and urban areas, and in low poverty and high poverty communities. Although various factors suggest different levels of vulnerability in diverse geographic areas, all parts of the state contain homeless and near-homeless people.

Family breakups are reported as the number one cause of homelessness, far ahead of factors such as eviction or utility disconnection. Interestingly, in the wake of welfare reform, losses of income subsidy benefits of any kinds were cited very infrequently as contributing to homelessness. These indicators point to family instability, such as domestic violence, being highly correlated with homeless families. This holds true in every type of community.

Single adults with children make up the greatest portion of homeless households. With this

as the foundation, it is no surprise that children make up just over half the homeless population. Women comprise well over half the adult homeless population, no doubt related to their presence as the single-parent of at least 80% of those households. This typical household structure is clearly related to the fact that family breakups are the number one cause, leaving women with children as the most vulnerable.

Half of all homeless households rely on income from employment. This suggests wages are too low for families to live securely even if employment is found, and that higher paying jobs are out of reach or unavailable to many. Again relating this to other findings, lack of living wage jobs and affordable housing were reported by most service providers as the most significant barriers to resolving homelessness in every type of community. Long term economic solutions that create living wage jobs and affordable housing seem necessary to solve this crisis.

This brief summary of findings likely defies the stereotype many Iowans have of the homeless that live among us. It may also cause a greater appreciation and empathy for those living in this situation as it becomes clear that more than half are children, and most adults are working to support their families. This suggests that most are trying to improve their condition, but remain victims of larger economic and societal forces. The full report examines the demographic profile of the homeless population in more detail, and discusses service providers' perception of the problem.

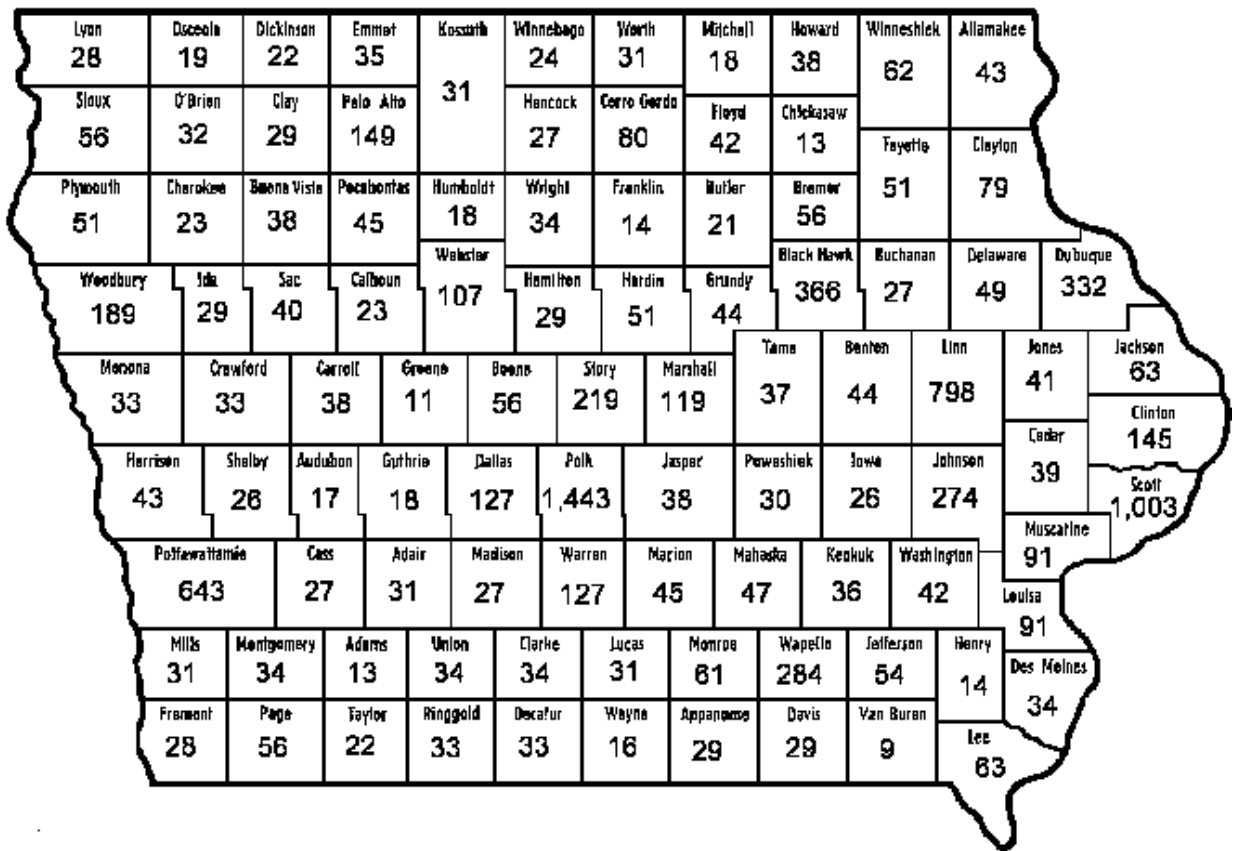


Figure 1: Estimated Number of Homeless Children
1999 Iowa Homeless Study

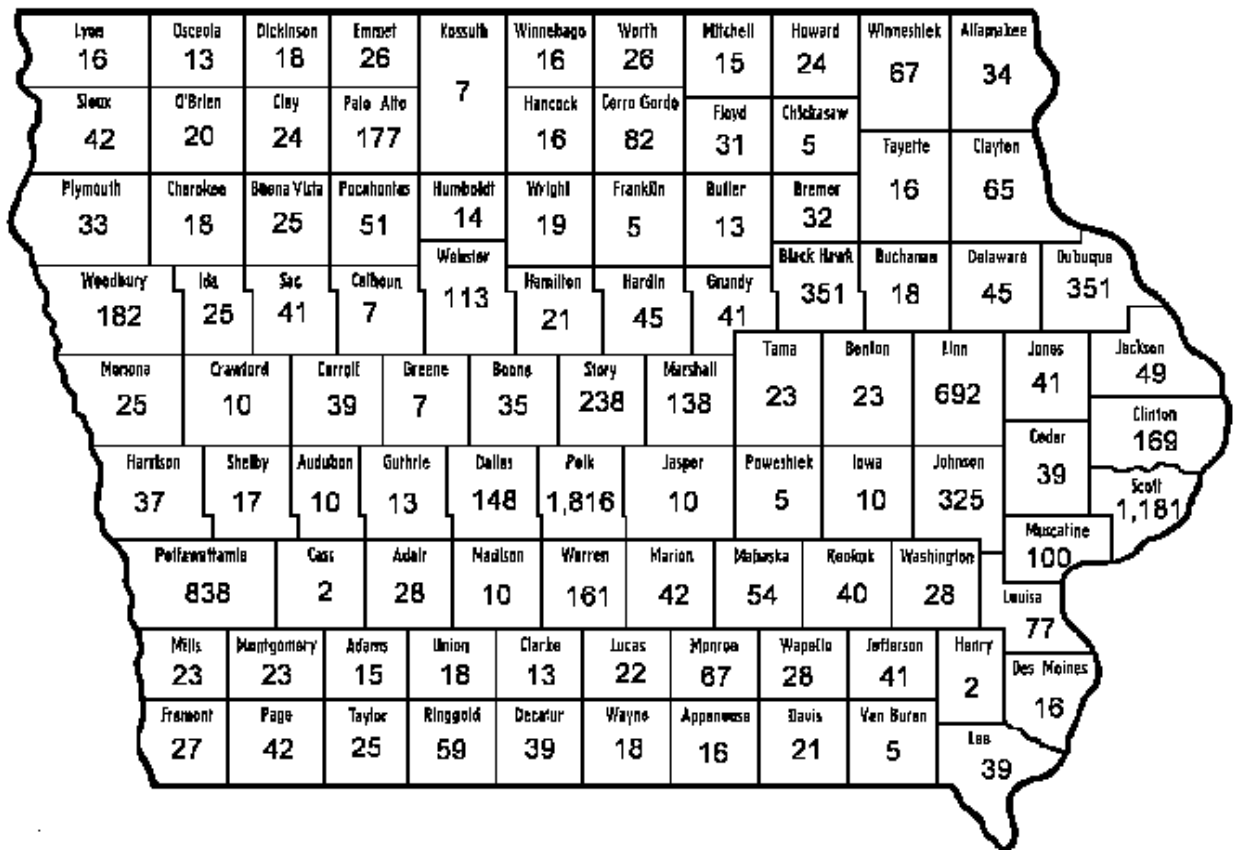


Figure 2: Estimated Number of Homeless Adults
1999 Iowa Homeless Study