

Fact Sheet

Questions and Answers on Homelessness Policy and Research

Data Snapshot: Doubled Up in the United States

Updated March 2008

There have been recent proposals to expand the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's definition of homeless to include households that are doubled up for economic reasons.ⁱ To assess the impact of this proposal, this data snapshot looks at how many people would be added to the homeless population if the proposal was adopted. The data show that expanding the definition to include people who are doubled up for economic reasons would increase the current homeless population (744,313 on a given night) by 3.8 million.

Definitions

There is no universal definition of doubled up for economic reasons. This analysis of the 2005 American Community Surveyⁱⁱ reveals that, depending on how doubled up is defined, between 2.4 million and 35 million people were living in doubled up housing situations and approximately 2.4 million to 10.5 million of those who were living in doubled up situations fell below the poverty level. To quantify the number of people who are living in doubled up situations, we examine the following three definitions:

Doubled Up – Family. Under this definition, which we constructed based on household composition, persons living in doubled up households include those living in the housing unit of an extended family member. Doubled up family is defined by relationship to head of household and includes, for example, households with a head of household's sibling, parent, grandparent, grandchildren, aunt or uncle, nephew or niece, or cousin, among others. Partners, roommates, people living in group quarters, and other non-relatives are not included in this definition.

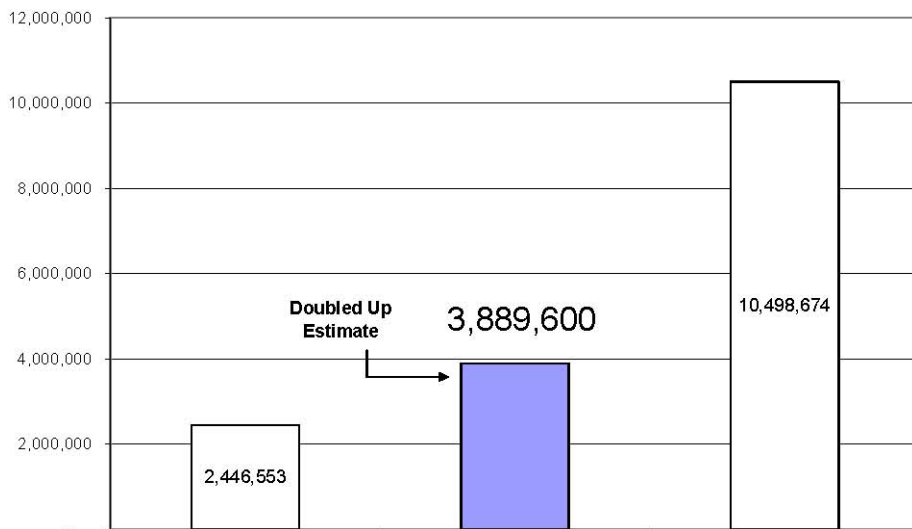
Doubled Up – Family, Friends, Other Non-relatives. Under this definition, which we constructed based on household composition, persons living in doubled up households include those with extended family, friends, and other non-relatives living in the unit. Doubled up family members were defined by the relationship to head of household and include, for example, households with a head of household’s sibling, parent, grandparent, grandchildren, aunt or uncle, nephew or niece, or cousin, among others. Other non-relatives are included; however, those identified as partners or roommates are not. People living in group quarters are not included in this definition.

Doubled Up – Subfamilies. Under this definition, we used Census defined subfamilies (those households which include more than one family) as a proxy for those who are doubled up. A “family” is defined as any group of persons related by blood, adoption, or marriage. An unrelated individual is considered a separate family. Thus, a household consisting of an elderly person and a live-in staff person (such as a home health aide) contains two families; a household consisting of a large, multiple-generation extended family with no boarders or lodgers counts as a single family. People living in group quarters are not included in this definition. This definition includes a large number of unmarried partners.

Approximately 3.8 Million People are Doubled Up for Economic Reasons

The three definitions of doubled up provide lower and upper bound estimates of 2.4 to 35 million people living in doubled up housing situations with approximately 2.4 to 10.5 million living below the poverty level. The mid-range estimate of 3.8 million doubled up persons living below the poverty level includes doubled up persons living with family, friends, and other non-relatives. This estimate, while not without limitations, seems to most accurately reflect the concept of doubled up living situations by including extended family, friends, and other non-relatives who fell below the poverty level and who may be sharing housing because of economic circumstances. It does not include unmarried partners, roommates, lodgers, or people living in group quarters.

Persons Living in Doubled Up Households - 3 Definitions



Doubled Up Family Doubled Up Family, Friends, Doubled Up Subfamilies and Non-relatives

Source: Author's tabulations of American Community Survey 2005

Number of Homeless and Doubled Up People

Approximately 744,313 people on a given night currently meet the HUD definition of homeless. Expanding the definition by including the 3.8 million people who are doubled up for economic reasons would increase the size of the homeless population by a factor of five. The current funding for homeless assistance grants funds only enough shelter for 56 percent of those who are currently defined as homeless. The amount that would have to be appropriated so that the amount of funding per homeless or doubled up person matched the actual amount of funding per homeless person in 2005 is \$7.725 billion instead of the \$1.241 billion that was actually available.

Methods

We analyzed 2005 data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). The U.S. Census Bureau conducts the ACS annually and produces nationally representative estimates on demographic, social, economic, and housing characteristics of the U.S. population. Respondents provide information on all people living in the household who are "living or staying here for more than 2 months" and anyone else who is "staying here who does not have another usual place to stay." Using household relationship variables, we constructed several definitions of doubled up and examined the prevalence of doubled up households.

There are a number of limitations to using Census data to quantify the extent of doubling up, a major one being that definitions were based on decisions about household composition and the person's relationship to the head of household, instead of on individual circumstances. In many cases, households may include non-relatives or extended family members by choice. Despite these limitations, we hope that this analysis serves as a starting point for talking more definitively about the doubled up population.

ⁱ HUD defines the term "homeless," "homeless individual," or "homeless person" as an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is—

- a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
- an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
- a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

ⁱⁱ Cunningham, M and M. Henry. 2006. Homelessness Counts. Washington, D.C. National Alliance to End Homelessness.