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Geography of Homelessness, Part 1: Defining the Spectrum

In recent years, there has been a growth in knowledge around the size and characteristics of the U.S. homeless population. Data submitted by local communities to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) have been analyzed and incorporated into reports produced by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, HUD, and other organizations. In all of these reports, data from communities of varying types and sizes – suburban towns, major cities, rural counties, and entire states – were aggregated to either the state or national level with limited attempt to account for differences in geographic characteristics. However, a more in depth understanding of the geography of homelessness can provide additional valuable insight into the scope of the homelessness problem and its solutions. This serves as the first in a series of briefs examining the geographic distribution of the homeless population in the United States.

Homelessness is commonly thought to be an urban issue, a perception that is reinforced by the presence of homeless people on the streets of major cities and in the characterization of homelessness in the media. And while homelessness in urban areas tends to be more visible, areas outside of urban centers are also affected by homelessness. The same structural issues that cause homelessness in cities – unaffordable housing and low incomes – exist in rural areas, and contribute to the number of people who are homeless in those areas. This brief provides some insight into the extent to which homelessness exists in rural and urban areas.

Continua of Care by Geographic Category

Data on homelessness are reported at an administrative geography unit called a Continuum of Care (CoC) through which federal homelessness funding is awarded. CoCs range widely from singular cities to entire states. This heterogeneity makes it difficult to ascertain exactly what fraction of the homeless population is located in rural or urban areas. In 2007, in the 50 states and the District of Columbia, there were 457 CoCs. In order to analyze homelessness by geographic community type, we categorized each of the CoCs based on its urban or rural constitution into one of five categories – rural, mostly rural, urban-rural mix, mostly urban, and urban. The map in figure 1 shows the 457 CoCs and the geographic category to which they belong. As previously stated, CoCs are often large geographic areas made up of a combination of rural and urban counties. This analysis used the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) definitions of “urban county” and “rural county” which are a composite of the U.S. Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget definitions.¹ The definitions of each category are as follows:

- “Urban” CoCs are made up of singular cities, urban counties, or regions made up entirely of urban counties.
- A CoC is considered “Rural” if it is a singular rural county or a group of counties that is almost entirely rural in composition.

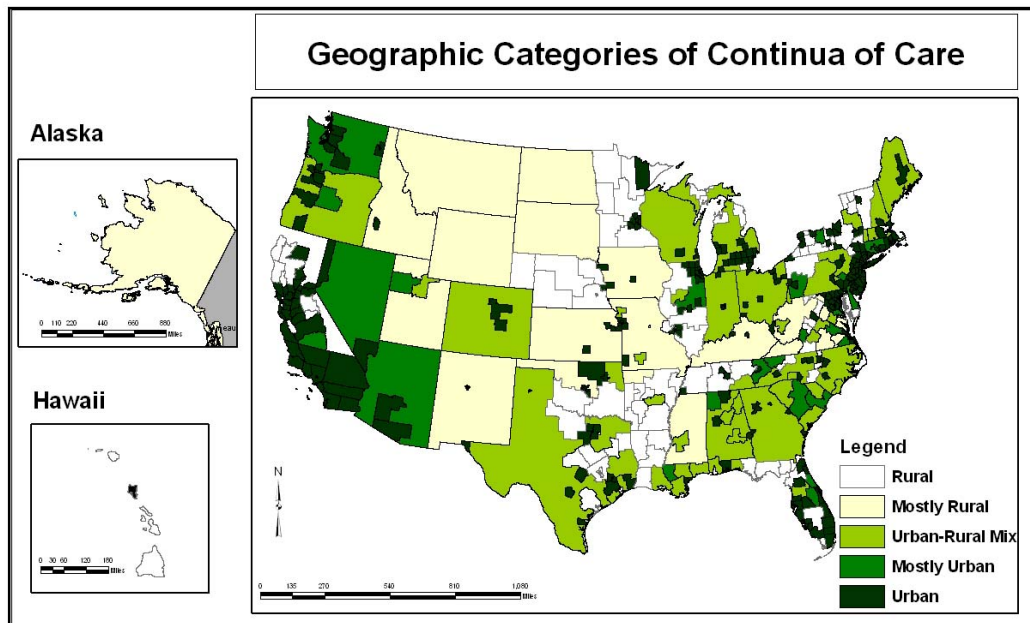
- “Mostly Urban” CoCs are those in which 80 percent or more of the counties are urban and/or more than 80 percent of the general population resides in the urban areas of the CoC.
- CoCs were considered “Mostly Rural” if more than 80 percent of the counties are rural and/or more than 80 percent of the general population resides in the rural parts of the CoC.
- The “Urban-Rural Mix” CoCs are regional CoCs that are not sufficiently urban to be classified as mostly urban and not sufficiently rural to be considered mostly rural.

The numbers of CoCs that belong to each category are outlined in Table 1 along with the percent of CoCs in each category. Overwhelmingly CoCs are urban, accounting for almost two-thirds of all CoCs. Second in number are Rural CoCs, accounting for over 16 percent. Table 1 and the map in Figure 1 show the range and level of geographic diversity that exists among CoCs.

Table 1. CoCs in each Geographic Category

Category	Number of CoCs	Percent of Total CoCs
Urban	293	64.11
Rural	74	16.19
Urban-Rural Mix	48	10.50
Mostly Urban	24	5.25
Mostly Rural	18	3.94

Figure 1. Continua of Care by Geographic Category

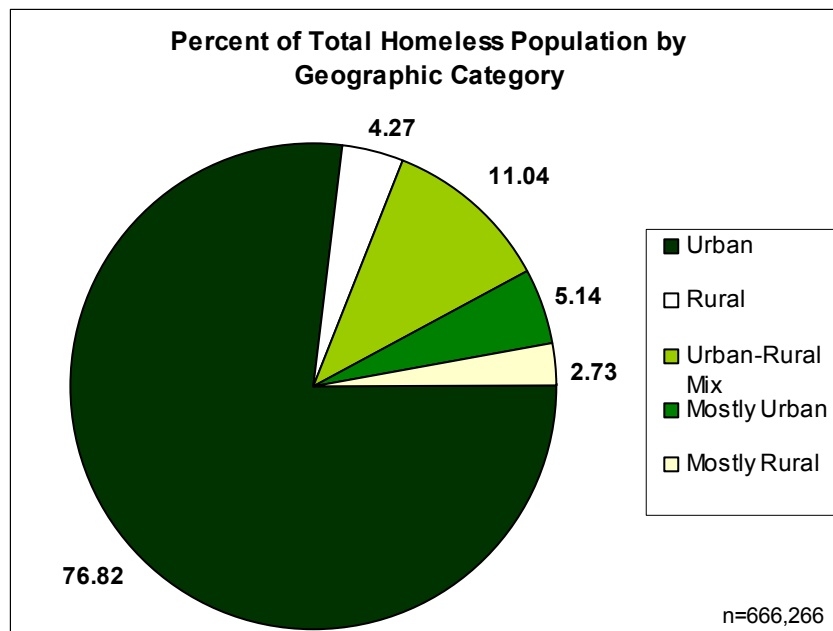


Total Homelessness by Geographic Category

The distribution of the estimated 671,859 people experiencing homelessness in the United States is overwhelmingly urban in orientation. As shown in figure 2, almost 77 percent of people experiencing homelessness were counted in urban CoCs. Together,

Urban and Mostly Urban CoCs account for over 82 percent of all people experiencing homelessness. Conversely, the number of people experiencing homelessness who were counted in Rural or Mostly Rural CoCs account for only 7 percent of the total number of homeless people in the United States. The share of the total homeless population counted within the 457 CoCs is broken down by category and illustrated in the chart in figure 2.

Figure 2. Percent of Total Homelessness in 2007 by Geography



Despite the sizable majority of people experiencing homelessness in urban areas nationally, homelessness within states has a higher degree of variability. Statewide CoCs such as Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana are mostly rural in composition and as such have a high rate of rural homelessness. Additionally, in 22 percent of states, over 50 percent of people experiencing homelessness were counted in rural or mostly rural CoCs. While quantifying the level of rural homelessness is complicated by various methodological challenges, this analysis uses the best data available with which to determine the extent of homelessness in both urban and rural areas.

The Geography of Homelessness series aims to address a number of questions regarding the spatial characteristics of homelessness. The following questions will be addressed in upcoming briefs:

- Do rural areas have different rates of homelessness than urban or other non-rural areas?
- Are members of subgroups (such as families, unsheltered, chronically homeless) counted in certain geography types more than others?
- To what extent are people experiencing homelessness in urban areas located in major cities as compared with other urban areas such as suburbs and small cities?
- Have certain geographic types (cities, suburbs, rural areas) experienced greater rates of change in their homeless populations?

- How do aspects of homeless assistance systems (including emergency capacity beds, transitional housing capacity, funding levels, and unmet needs) vary by geography?
- Do CoCs of the same geographic type share other economic characteristics such as poverty rates and levels of housing affordability?

ⁱ The Housing Assistance Council Definition of Urban and Rural can be found here:
http://www.ruralhome.org/dataportal/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3&Itemid=5&limit=1&limitstart=1