

## The Persistence of Homelessness and the Invisible Homeless

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Since 1986, the University of Delaware, the state of Delaware's Office of Community Services, the Delaware Homeless Planning Council and others have been collecting and analyzing data on the problem of homelessness in the state. There is a very obvious pattern in the data over these many years - the problem is not subsiding!

The data showed a significant growth in the number of homeless persons living in emergency and transitional shelters in the state between 1986 and 1995, a leveling off of this growth between 1995 and 2000, and an increase again between 2000 and 2003. Over this 18 year period there have been two major economic recessions; one in the early 1990's, and the one we are coming out of right now. While these two downturns in macroeconomic activity have been serious, the majority of the quarters have seen positive if not robust economic growth. Yet, despite almost two decades of good economic health, the number and percentage of homeless persons in the state have not shrunk. Why?

The primary reason is that homelessness is a very complex problem. It's partly a livable wage and unemployment problem, but not entirely. It's partly a housing affordability problem, but not entirely. It's partly a mental and physical health problem, but not entirely. It's partly a domestic violence problem, but not entirely. It's partly a substance abuse problem, but not entirely - etc., etc., etc. Local as well national research tells us that many factors can weaken the ability of individuals and families to find and sustain themselves in housing. Frequently, there are two or more concurrent serious problems that push a person or family into homelessness, and then once there, they must contend with homelessness itself as yet another serious problem.

Even with accumulating knowledge about the complex nature and causes of homelessness, we have very limited knowledge about what types of program interventions work best in reducing and preventing the problem. The Delaware Homeless Planning Council in cooperation with the Delaware Housing Capacity Building Program and others are working hard to implement an Internet-based Homeless Management Information System statewide.



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## Section Three: Shelter and Poverty

This system helps emergency shelters and other homeless services providers manage their internal operations, and at the same, and without violating the privacy of clients, track what kinds of services are being provided across agencies. As this type of data is collected and analyzed over time, administrators and planners will be in a better position to determine which services are most effective in attacking homelessness. This system is being used by five or six agencies now, and will be available to many additional agencies during 2004.

While the Homeless Management Information System has great potential for providing us with very useful information about who is being served and what services work best, we must not forget that it is a challenging task to get services to the people who need them. Many people who are homeless or at risk for homelessness seek assistance themselves, but others do not. Little data has been collected on these “invisible homeless persons” - those who don’t approach shelters and live in automobiles, tents, under viaducts, doubled-up with friends and relatives, or in their own homes under the threat of domestic violence.

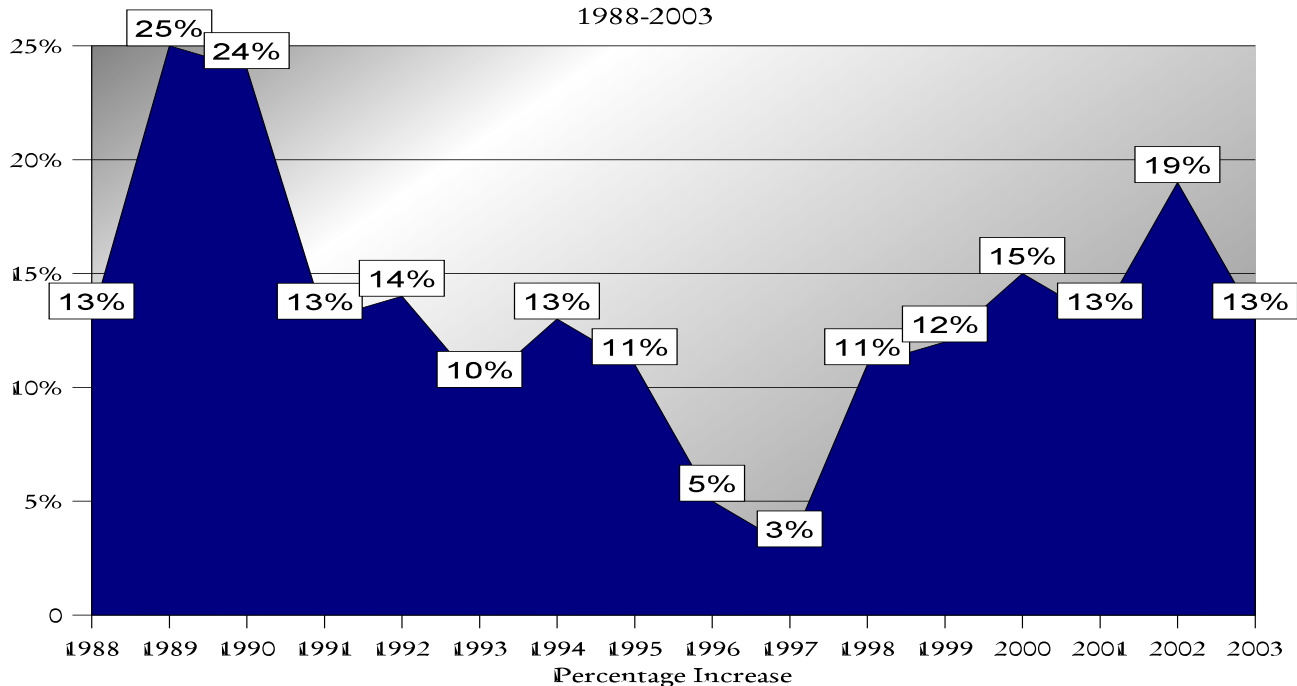
This past year, the Community Legal Aid Society released their *Legal Needs in Delaware* study which provides some of

the first hard evidence of the prevalence of the so-called “doubling up” phenomenon. Focusing on households with incomes of 150% of the poverty level or less, 13% of those surveyed statewide reported that sometime during 2001 they had moved in with another household because they did not have a place to live. Just as dramatic, 26% responded that someone else had moved in to live with them in 2001 because they had no place to live. This is not only evidence of a sizable hidden homeless population, but shows that there are many lower-income households placing their own housing and financial security at risk by hosting homeless people.

The homeless problem is not subsiding. We must redouble our efforts to supply effective services to those who seek them, and we must make outreach to those who are invisible. To stop the epidemic of homelessness, we must not only be persistent, but we must be strategic - providing the most effective services possible to those who need them most.

Increase in Demand for Emergency Shelter in American Cities

1988-2003



Source: U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2003 Survey of Hunger and Homelessness