

**Homeless Families with Children  
Receiving Welfare Assistance in Washington State**

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August, 1998

Research & Data Analysis  
Washington State Department of Social and Health Services  
Olympia, WA 98504-5204

Report Number 6 - 47

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I am grateful to the staff and administrators at several DSHS Community Service Offices, who graciously took the time and trouble to help me understand how they provide services to homeless families, and how they use the state's welfare data system, ACES.

At the Belltown CSO I thank Dorella Owens and Audrey Moreland.

At the Rainier CSO: Tom Haines, Dan Owens, Harry Schmitt, Evelyn Rogers, Hue So, Juanita Versher, Mahari Abraha, Cassandra Pinkney-White, Linda Schule, Marilyn Domes, Pat Holmes, Char Bryant, Dawna Williams, Lillie Poole, Dick Shull, and Sales Chaumath.

At the King South CSO: Val Meads, Vaughn Hayes, Christina Sallas, Robin Hicks, Judy Chaney, Doc Church, Jeff Manipon, Darrin Best, Jacinda Chaney, Hazel Stenberg, and Christal Arthur.

At the Pierce North CSO: Jon Halvorson, Fran Pieterman, Robert Perry, Barbara Brady, and Annie Felizardo.

At the Pierce West CSO: Tina Hatley, Randy Francom, Rick Beatty, Tom Wescott, and Jodi Ellis.

At the Pierce South CSO: Rebecca Coffey, Sally Graves, Ladonna Parsons, Bobby Owens, Esther DiJoseph, Tara Hutchison, Cheryl McCarron, Karen Schrodt, Linda Barnes, Wanita Cannon, Lydia Mendoza, Gem Fucal, Linda Tyson, and Sharlene Daniel.

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Lon Freeman and Roger Calhoun participated substantially in this project. Lon Freeman did a good share of the fieldwork and all the case studies using ACES, and he helped in data analysis. Roger Calhoun prepared the ACES data and carried out the computer analyses. Without Mr. Freeman's and Mr. Calhoun's assistance this project could not have been done.

# Homeless Families with Children Receiving Welfare Assistance in Washington State

## Summary

*On average, during each benefit-month between June 1997 and May 1998, about 362 welfare families with children were newly coded as homeless on Washington state's welfare database. Most of these families were not on the streets, however. Some two-thirds (or more), those families coded Homeless-With Housing, were likely sharing living quarters with other family or friends.*

*The other third, about 121 families per month, may have been living in either temporary shelters or places not suitable for family living. A group of 121 such families would typically comprise about 188 children and 144 adults newly homeless and without housing each month.*

*The ACES codes we rely on here are not as reliable as one would like. These estimates are uncertain, and we cannot separately estimate the numbers living in temporary shelters and the numbers without even minimally adequate housing. Duration of homelessness cannot be estimated, and could vary from as little as one night to many months.*

This report provides basic data about families with children, who receive welfare assistance and are newly reported homeless in Washington state. The report provides data to the CTED-DSHS work group that is preparing an inventory of available state assistance. The findings convey some sense of the numbers of newly homeless families, and should thus be helpful for statewide services planning.

Good data on homeless families is hard to come by. What data we have is hard to interpret and controversial often. This report is based on data in the state's welfare information system, ACES. We believe that most homeless families in Washington state are already DSHS welfare clients or soon become so. Thus ACES offers a reasonable source of data for studying homeless families. But even the ACES data for our purposes have serious limitations, and so too do the analyses and conclusions in this report.

### **Further findings**

Over the full 12-month study period ACES data identified 4,344 newly homeless families, comprising 11,949 persons: 6,756 children, 5,193 adults. The 12-month group included 710 (or more) homeless pregnant women. Some 397 of these women had no children and were in one-person households.

Welfare supports. About 73 percent of the entire group received cash grants, most, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families grants. Close to 90 percent had state-provided health insurance; close to 90 percent got Food Stamps. (Of course, homeless families not on welfare would not be getting any of these supports.)

Prior histories. Sixty percent had been active DSHS welfare recipients in the month before they were newly coded as homeless. Thirteen percent were homeless more than once over the 12 study months.

Geography. Some 52 percent were enrolled with welfare offices in the urban Puget Sound area: from Everett to Olympia, including Bremerton and Puyallup. Spokane welfare offices enrolled near 8 percent, and the Vancouver and Orchards offices enrolled about 7 percent.

### **Sidebar: Are welfare data a good way to study family homelessness ?**

We believe that most homeless *families* in Washington state are already DSHS welfare clients or soon become so. (This is surely not true for homeless single adults.)

It is crucial to understand whether many homeless families long remain without welfare, but that cannot be determined with welfare data alone. It is of relevance, nonetheless, that some 60 percent of newly homeless family members who were on welfare during the 12 months June 1997 – May 1998 were already active welfare clients though not yet homeless the previous month. (Of the 40 percent of homeless family members who were not active welfare clients the previous month, some could have been clients in earlier months.)

We believe that most homeless families that are not yet DSHS welfare clients, once they become homeless, do apply for help at a DSHS welfare office. Mainly, they would apply out of concern for the well-being of their children, and at the encouragement of friends and family, and through referral by community workers. Almost all would be found eligible. At that point ACES would record them as a family on welfare, and homeless, and they would join the study population.

Surprisingly, reviewing the research literature we found no recent data from sizable studies on the proportion of homeless families that were already on welfare. O’Flaherty (1996, p. 214), states that most such families are on welfare, but basing that on 14 year-old data from New York City. Burt and Cohen (1989), using data on homeless persons in larger American cities, found that in 1987 72 percent of women with children present reported receiving some sort of public assistance grant during the prior 30 days (yet only 53 percent reported getting Food Stamps).

For program planning and monitoring it would be useful to have data on what proportion of those homeless families are and are not on welfare. We would gain a better understanding of how well the state’s welfare programs reach homeless families and what sorts of families the programs does not reach well. We would know better the extent to which ACES data provide a full picture.

Such a research project could be done quickly and would not be costly, but confidentiality must be paramount. Cooperating community agencies could request local homeless families to voluntarily provide their identities, strictly for university research, to improve the futures of homeless families like themselves. Those identities would not be given to DSHS. A university researcher would compare the identities with DSHS-provided welfare records.

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Brendan O’Flaherty. *Making Room: The Economics of Homelessness*. Harvard U. P., 1996

Burt, Martha R. and Cohen, Barbara E., (1989). Differences Among Homeless Single Women, Women with Children, and Single Men. *Social Problems*, 36, 508-524

## **Homeless Families with Children Receiving Welfare Assistance in Washington State**

*On average, during each of the twelve benefit-months between June 1997 and May 1998, about 362 welfare families with children were newly coded as homeless on Washington state's welfare database. About two-thirds (or more) of the group were coded as Homeless-With Housing. Most of this With Housing subgroup were likely using shared living arrangements they had themselves arranged with family or friends.*

*The other third, about 121 families per month, may have been living either in temporary shelters or places not suitable for family living. A group of 121 such families would typically comprise about 188 children and 144 adults newly homeless and without housing each month.*

*This is a report about such families with children, who receive welfare assistance and are newly reported homeless in Washington state.*

### The study population

The data for this report come from the state's welfare information system, ACES. We believe that most homeless families in Washington state are already DSHS welfare clients or soon become so. Thus ACES offers a reasonable source of data for studying homeless families. See Sidebar for further discussion on the pros and cons of using welfare data to study family homelessness.

To be included in this study a person had to meet three conditions. The person that month had to be: (a) a member of a family that included a child under 18, (b) active on one or another DSHS welfare program, and (c) newly coded as homeless. A person coded homeless in a particular benefit-month was considered newly-coded homeless if they did not have a homeless code (any of the three types) in the prior month. Technical methods are described in Appendix 1.

The study population includes children and adults. Pregnant women are included as well, even where there is no child in their family, provided those women are on welfare and coded homeless. Note that this study population includes homeless families sharing homes with others.

To describe this group we use the term "newly-reported homeless" or "newly homeless" for short. Note that some of these newly-coded homeless persons may have been homeless for one month or several even before they were so coded on ACES. And, for some of these people one may see on ACES a prior period of homelessness as well (but not the immediately preceding month.). Data on multiple periods of homelessness is presented later.

### For this study purpose the homelessness codes in ACES have substantial limitations.

The crucial homeless "Living Arrangement" codes in ACES are not as reliable as one would like for research and planning. To check the quality of the codes we reviewed with welfare office staff and records about 140 homeless families (350 or so persons) coded "Homeless-Without Housing," plus we did partial reviews of 60 or so other homeless-coded families.

From the reviewed cases, it appears that welfare workers generally and relatively promptly record new-occurring family homelessness, provided the situation is reported by the family.

Re-coding to end the homeless code when the family reports regaining a stable residence is often delayed by several months or more. As a result, we found newly-entered homeless codes more frequently valid than continuing homeless codes, which are often no longer valid. For this reason we had to limit the analyses to families newly coded homeless. (For further discussion on data quality see Appendix 2.)

## **Findings**

### Numbers of homeless families and family members

Over the full twelve-month study period ACES data identified 4,344 newly homeless families, comprising 11,949 persons: 6,756 children, 5,193 adults. This averages to 362 newly-coded homeless families per month: 563 children and 433 adults. (The data by month are shown on page 5.)

This estimate of newly-coded homeless families does not indicate the total number of homeless families in the state at any time, nor how long families remain homeless. The number of newly-coded homeless families does provide some indication of the workload entailed in working with all newly homeless families on welfare to help them regain a stable home. In considering such a workload one should also include DSHS welfare workers' prevention efforts to assist families, not included in this study; that are at imminent risk of being evicted and thus becoming homeless. To the extent these prevention efforts are successful, these clients never appear on homeless counts though they are certainly an important part of the total picture..

### Living arrangements while homeless

Two-thirds of the newly-homeless families were coded Homeless-With Housing. The two-thirds estimate is not precise, and the figure may be higher. Our review of case narratives indicated that Homeless-With Housing families are generally sharing living quarters, usually with family or friends, under arrangements they themselves make. These shared arrangements sometimes continued for long periods, sometimes for only a few weeks or even days.

As for the others newly coded homeless, those not using shared housing, the ACES data cannot provide separate estimates of the number relying on public shelters and the number without even minimally adequate shelter. The homeless codes are not used consistently enough to allow such fine estimating.

The review of case narratives indicated that some homeless families move from one site to another, sometimes after only a few nights. These changes include moving from one shared dwelling to another, or from shared living to a shelter or to the streets, or the reverse. These patterns are important for program planning and particularly for targeting services, but such short-lived shelter arrangements are today not recorded well by the ACES Living Arrangement field.

When is shared housing temporary and when is it one's home? The review of ACES narratives and data also indicated that many homeless families, even those coded *Homeless-Without Housing*, may in fact be sharing housing. This raises the question of when should a family that is sharing housing be considered homeless, and when should that shared living arrangement be considered the family's home?

Duration appears to be key here. Duration is implied in the *homeless family* definition set out in Chapter Two of the 1998 DCTED-DSHS "Washington State Homeless Families Plan: "...a family that lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...." (emphasis added) Similar phrasing is seen in the 1987 federal definition of homeless individual: "...(An) individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence...." (Homeless Assistance Act of 1987; emphasis added). A DSHS administrative definition of homeless likewise emphasizes duration:

**DSHS definition of "homeless" (WAC 388-49-020 (37))**

*(A) homeless individual means a person lacking a fixed and regular nighttime residence or a person whose primary nighttime residence is a supervised shelter, halfway house, temporary residence with others, or place not ordinarily used as sleeping accommodations for humans. (emphasis added)*

Using ACES data one cannot estimate the duration of homelessness for the families coded Homeless-With Housing. For one, short-term shared arrangements are not always reported to the welfare office. Or, a family may move from one shared home to another, staying only a few nights in each, and may even so inform the welfare office, with the careful worker then recording each of those new addresses, but their Homeless-With Housing code in ACES would not change. Last, as already mentioned, a family's homeless code in ACES is not always shut off when the family reports regaining a stable home.

Family composition and ages

The newly-coded homeless families group was disproportionately comprised of young parents and their young children. About 87 percent were in single-parent families, usually female-headed. Nine percent were in two-parent families.

The children: Fifty-seven percent of the entire group were under 18 and, of these children, 41 percent were under 5 years of age. Most of the under-18's were living with adults: mainly with parent(s), but some with step-parents, co-parents, grandparents, aunts, etc. Still, 49 of the under 18 year-olds were coded as heads-of-households and as such presumably were living on their own. This under-18 and head-of-own household group includes 19 homeless pregnant young women.

The adults: Forty-three percent of the entire group were 18 or older. Most of the adults were parents; some were spouses, co-parents, unmarried parents of unborns, etc. A third were under 25; more than half were under 30.

Pregnant women: At least 710 of the entire newly-homeless group were pregnant women. One of every six newly-homeless households included a pregnant woman. There were 397 pregnant women in households without children (household size = 1), plus at least 313 in families where there was a child or another adult present. The true number of pregnant women is higher than 710, but with these ACES data one cannot readily identify women who are pregnant, when they are in one- or two-parent grant households with children present.

Of the 397 pregnant women newly homeless and in households without children, 6 were ages 14-16, 13 were 17 years old, and 250 were between the ages of 18 and 25.

What DSHS welfare programs were these homeless families using

About 73 percent of the newly-homeless persons on welfare were in families receiving cash grants. (See chart below.). Most grant recipients also received Medicaid health insurance and Food Stamps. The great majority of the grant recipients were relying on the state’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (formerly known as AFDC). A few relied on Washington state’s General Assistance program for pregnant women

Some 20 percent of the entire group were receiving Medical Assistance (and Food Stamps in most cases) but no grants. Seven percent received only Food Stamps. (Of course, homeless families not on welfare would not be getting any of these supports.)

**Welfare programs provided to newly-homeless family members**

<b>Principal welfare program</b>		<b>Number of persons</b>	<b>Percent of all persons</b>
Cash grant	TANF: Temp Assistance for Needy Families	8385	70 %
	DA: Diversion Assistance	21	
	CEAP: Consolidated Emergency Assistance	80	
	GH: Legal Guardian	6	
	GS: General Assistance – Pregnant	249	2 %
	GA, GX: General Assistance and Presumptive SSI*	15	
	Subtotal : All grant recipients	8756	73 %
Medical Assist	(In addition to those receiving cash grants)	2358	20 %
Food Stamps only	(In addition to those receiving cash grants or medical assistance)	835	7 %
Total		11949	100 %

\* The GA and GX programs support individuals, not families. These few persons were likely drawn into the study population because they were sharing their homes with (homeless) TANF families. For Food Stamps purposes, the household includes not only the nuclear family but all persons sharing meals.



Were many of these newly-homeless persons already DSHS welfare clients?

Sixty percent of all these newly-recorded homeless family members on welfare had already been active welfare recipients in the month previous to their becoming coded homeless. Of the 40 percent of homeless family members who were not active welfare clients the previous month, some could have been clients in earlier months.

Multiple periods of homelessness

Twelve percent of the group had been newly-homeless twice during the twelve-month study period. One percent had been newly-homeless three times or more. (See table below.)

<b>Number of times person was newly-coded as homeless over the 12-month study period</b>	<b>Number of persons</b>	
1	9161	87 %
2	1258	12 %
3	88	1 %
4	2	
Total unique persons	10509	100 %
Total newly-coded homeless events seen	11949	

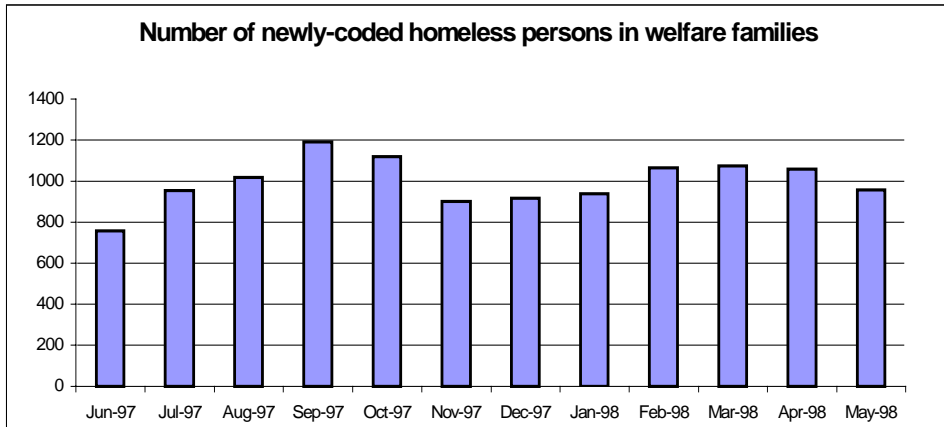
Duration of homelessness could not be estimated, because of data limitations. Duration could well vary from as little as one night to many months.

Numbers trend over the last twelve months

The graph on the next page shows the numbers of persons in newly-coded homeless families each month over the twelve-month study period, June 1997 – May 1998

The two peaks suggest seasonalities. The August through October peak may be agriculture labor-related; the February to April peak may be weather-related.). Seasonality cannot be confirmed with just one's year's data, however.

A persistent increase over the one year's time period is not apparent, but the data are complicated by the apparently seasonal fluctuations. (Growth in the numbers of homeless family members could be better studied by comparing the next year's data, month for month, with last year's.)



Geography: Where were they living?

Some 52 percent of the entire group were enrolled with welfare offices in the greater Puget Sound area: from Everett to Olympia, including Kitsap County. The table immediately below shows the six welfare offices with the greatest numbers of newly-homeless families and persons during the 12-month study period. The data for all welfare offices and DSHS regions are shown on the facing page.

**Welfare offices with highest numbers of newly-homeless families**

Welfare office (also known as Community Svc Office or CSO)	Number of newly-homeless families seen over 12 months	Number of newly-homeless family members seen over 12 months	Average number of persons enrolled in TANF families over same 12 months	Ratio of newly- homeless family members to average TANF persons
Entire state	4344	11949	229,478	1 in 230
King – South (Kent)	273	801	10,554	1 in 158
Vancouver	193	575	7,562	1 in 158
Everett	191	514	7,103	1 in 166
Rainier	184	509	8,255	1 in 195
Pierce – West	180	461	10,434	1 in 272
Pierce – South	165	442	11,013	1 in 299

The right-hand column of the above table also shows that the proportion of TANF family members who were newly homeless varied among welfare offices. Statewide, about 1 out of every 230 TANF family members was newly-homeless each month. This proportion of TANF clients who were newly-homeless was appreciably higher at the King-South, Vancouver, Everett and Rainier offices.

**Numbers of newly-recorded homeless welfare families and persons,  
for the 12-month period June 1997 – May 1998,  
by DSHS Region and welfare office (CSO)**

<b>CSO</b>	<b>Families</b>	<b>Persons</b>	<b>CSO</b>	<b>Families</b>	<b>Persons</b>
<b>REGION 1</b>			<b>REGION 4</b>		
1 Othello	21	74	40 Eastside Seattle	70	197
4 Wenatchee (Chelan Co.)	68	180	41 Rainier	184	509
9 Wenatchee (Douglas Co.)	8	26	42 Ballard	126	333
10 Republic	9	24	43 King South Seattle	273	801
13 Moses Lake	88	282	44 Burien	109	310
22 Davenport	4	10	45 Federal Way	89	229
24 Okanogan	42	117	46 Capitol Hill	110	311
26 Newport	35	111	47 Belltown	124	285
32 Spokane Central	1	2	55 West Seattle	64	147
33 Colville	43	132	74 Lake City	58	147
38 Colfax	5	19	80 Holgate-Renton	47	136
58 Spokane E. Valley	114	303	REGION 4 total	1254	3405
59 Spokane North	120	323	<b>REGION 5</b>		
60 Spokane Southwest	115	274	18 Bremerton	133	345
70 Spokane DCFS	3	9	48 Pierce South	165	442
REGION 1 total	676	1886	49 Pierce North	134	377
<b>REGION 2</b>			51 Puyallup Valley	98	261
2 Clarkston	6	19	67 Pierce West	180	461
3 Kennewick (Benton Co.)	62	179	REGION 5 total	710	1886
7 Dayton	3	7	<b>REGION 6</b>		
11 Pasco (Franklin Co.)	58	158	5 Port Angeles	61	146
19 Ellensburg	11	34	6 Vancouver	193	575
36 Walla Walla	67	204	8 Kelso	69	171
39 Yakima (Yakima Co.)	25	53	14 Aberdeen	81	220
50 Toppenish	15	49	16 Port Townsend	24	65
54 Sunnyside	17	58	20 White Salmon	4	15
69 Yakima (Kittitas Co.)	21	47	21 Chehalis	58	153
75 Wapato (Yakima Co.)	11	33	23 Shelton	51	141
REGION 2 total	296	841	25 South Bend	1	2
<b>REGION 3</b>			30 Stevenson	8	22
15 Oak Harbor	22	68	34 Olympia	133	348
28 Friday Harbor	4	6	53 Orchards	109	314
29 Mount Vernon	100	295	61 Elma	20	57
31 Everett	191	514	62 Goldendale	16	41
37 Bellingham	94	289	64 Forks	17	60
52 Alderwood	64	207	71 Long Beach	9	20
65 Smokey Point	37	98	76 MAA, statewide	20	37
68 Skykomish Valley	22	67	REGION 6 total	874	2387
REGION 3 total	534	1544	<b>STATE total</b>		
				<b>4344</b>	<b>11949</b>



## **Appendix 1: Defining the study group: Members of newly-recorded homeless families with children on welfare**

The data come from an ACES-derivative database, called CARD. CARD is designed specifically to facilitate analyses such as this one.

We studied twelve benefit-months: June 1997 – May 1998. Data for earlier and later months were believed incomplete, for various reasons.

To be included in the study population for a particular benefit-month, a person had to be seen on CARD as:

- A member of a family that included a child (person under 18) and
- An active beneficiary of one or another DSHS welfare program and
- Newly-recorded that benefit-month as having one of the three homeless-indicating Living Arrangement codes:
  - HH* Homeless - With Housing
  - EH* In Emergency Housing
  - HO* Homeless – Without Housing

Welfare benefits could include any combination of cash grant, medical assistance, and Food Stamps.

Pregnant women included. We suspended the requirement that there be a child in the family if a person met both other conditions and that month was eligible for one of the state's welfare programs specifically for pregnant women. This recognizes that Washington state generally makes available to pregnant women the same welfare benefits as for families with children.

Very often, a person was found to be a member of several Assistance Units all in the same month, most often a Grant AU and a Food Stamps AU. In such cases we retained the AU record for the most important program (see below), plus we retained the information about all other the other programs the person had used that month.

The AU retention priority order was: (1) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (formerly AFDC), (2) Diversion Assistance, (3) Consolidated Emergency Assistance, (4) General Assistance – Pregnant, (5) General Assistance – Guardian, (6) General Assistance – Other, (7) Refugee, (8) Medical Assistance, (9) Food Stamps.



## Appendix 2: Quality of the Homeless Codes

The three homeless Living Arrangement codes are not always reliable, for many reasons. For one, the field is not mandatory, and quality data are not required. Most Living Arrangement codes generally do not affect benefits (though homeless codes may). The field may not be audited.

Updating the Living Arrangement field takes time for the welfare worker, already very busy with mandated assignments. As each person carries their own Living Arrangement code and code history in ACES, updating the codes when a family becomes homeless or ends homelessness requires separately updating the code for each family member.

More important, when workers do update these codes, they do not have guidelines on when a person should be coded homeless or not, and when to use each of the different homeless codes. Living circumstances are sometimes ambiguous, and in some cases there may be administrative reasons for preferring one code over another. Welfare workers and local offices sometimes have differing views of what the codes mean and when they should be used.

To assess the validity of these codes we together with welfare office staff reviewed some 140 families (about 350 persons) coded in ACES as Homeless-Without Housing. We used the ACES data histories and whatever narrative remarks had been recorded on ACES along with the data. We also considered facts from the family's hard-copy records, when available, and whatever that worker knew about the family.

In addition, we had earlier reviewed perhaps 60 other homeless-coded families (150 or so persons). The earlier reviews used only the data and narrative remarks recorded in ACES.

From these reviews we learned the following about the homeless codes in ACES:

1. Sometimes homeless families do not report they are homeless. This in spite of the strong incentive to notify the welfare office of every change of address so as to assure prompt delivery of benefits. Some families report belatedly that they had become homeless months earlier, some never report.

Families may not report homelessness because they expect to soon have another place to live, or because they feel embarrassed or believe (erroneously) that DSHS would remove their children, or that they might lose part or all of their benefits. Reporting to the welfare office can be burdensome, and is not always a priority when one's family is homeless. We believe that short-duration homelessness is especially under-reported.

2. Welfare workers appear reasonably conscientious in promptly recording homelessness when that is first reported. But the dates recorded in ACES may not be the true start dates. When homelessness information is received late, ACES apparently offers the worker no way to backdate the Living Arrangement code to record its true start date.

3. Welfare workers commonly do not promptly enter an at-home code when a homeless family regains a stable living situation. The full record indicates frequently that the worker knew the family's homelessness had ended, indeed, that the worker promptly and correctly updated the materially important address and shelter expense data. But the homeless Living Arrangement codes are not commonly updated, and the homeless code may continue for months.

4. There are no guidelines on when to judge a family homeless, and when to judge it living "at home," albeit in unappealing circumstances, perhaps. Some families coded homeless could as well be coded as living in "at home" situations. Some families coded "At Home" may be better considered homeless, all based on the facts the family presents.

5. Even where the family is clearly homeless, there is often ambiguity as to which of the three homeless codes is best. There are no guidelines here, and practice varies among workers and offices. Therefore we do not analyze the three homeless codes separately. A person is considered homeless if they are coded with any of the three. A change in coding from one of the three homeless codes to another is considered a continuation of homelessness.

Counting newly-homeless persons As homeless codes were often not shut off when homelessness ended, the total number of welfare clients coded homeless at any time may substantially over-estimate the number actually remaining homeless. *Newly-reported* homelessness was more reliably recorded. This report therefore focuses on data about *newly-homeless* families, more precisely, about *newly-coded as homeless* families).

This measure, too, has its failings. To the extent that some welfare families never report their homelessness, a count of newly--recorded homeless families will underestimate the true number that newly-homeless each month. (There is as well the question considered in the sidebar as to whether any substantial number of homeless families remain for long outside the welfare system.)

The homeless data from CARD and used for this report were further constrained in that, while ACES retains all Living Arrangement codes entered for every benefit-month, the derivative CARD database retains only the latest code for each month. CARD data will therefore under-represent brief homelessness: where the family first reports it is homeless, then, soon afterwards, reports being no longer homeless. Most such paired events would occur in the same month, thus the homeless event, being the earlier one, would not be retained in CARD. Note that the tendency for welfare workers to often not record promptly an end to homelessness may result in CARD retaining the data of that (short-lived) homelessness. Of course, such an improperly retained homeless event would have no end-date and thus would appear to continue on, and we would have no way of knowing from CARD that that homelessness had been brief.