

# The Struggles of Homeless Hispanic Families

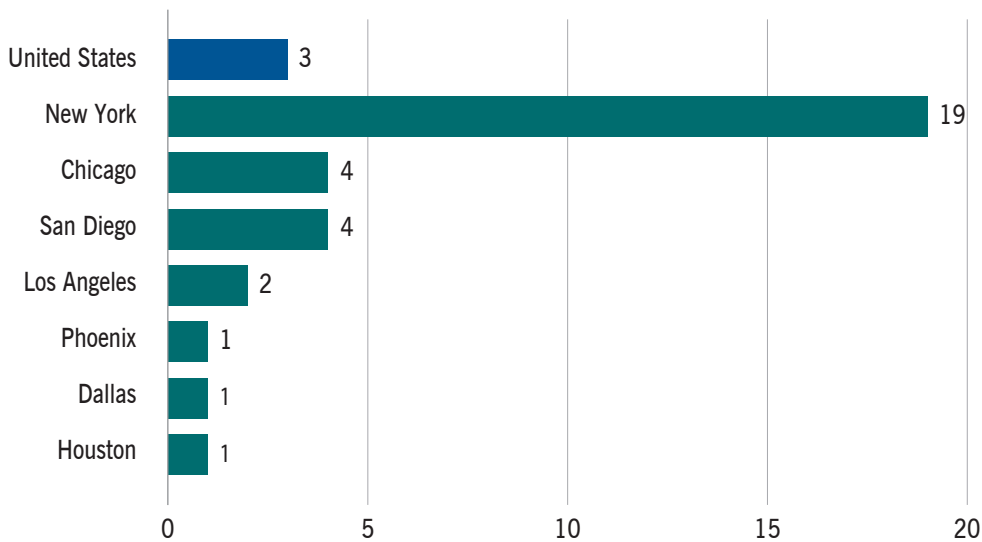
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Studies over the years have continually shown that Hispanic families are overrepresented in U.S. homelessness and poverty statistics when compared with whites. In 2011 over one-quarter (29.6%) of Hispanic families with children lived in poverty, more than twice the rate of white families (12.2%). Hispanic families also experience homelessness at much higher rates. One of every 396 Hispanic family members stayed in a home-

less shelter in 2011, a rate nearly three times higher than that for persons in white families (one in 1,067; see Figure 1).

Such statistics may represent an undercount of Hispanics who are homeless due to factors affecting many families of Hispanic origin. Language barriers, fear of deportation of undocumented family members, and migratory labor patterns result in

## How Many Times as Likely as Whites Were Hispanic Family Members to Experience Homelessness in 2011?



Note: A value of one indicates equal likelihood between Hispanics and whites.

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The 2011 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*; U.S. Census Bureau, *2011 American Community Survey 1-year Estimates*.

# on the Homefront

less use of homeless services and, as a consequence, underrepresentation in homelessness statistics. Hispanic families may rely on help from relatives over agency-run social services, reducing the rate of literally homeless Hispanics but increasing the number of doubled-up families who live in potentially overcrowded and substandard conditions and are disconnected from services. These arrangements may also limit access to employment and other opportunities, since living with relatives can reduce the time a person spends with co-workers, friends, and others outside the extended family. Some studies suggest that literally homeless Hispanics are also more likely to stay in atypical unsheltered locations, for example in abandoned buildings, thus frequently “hidden” from and overlooked by homelessness surveyors.

Issues surrounding immigration status limit low-income Hispanic families’ access to benefit programs that could keep them from experiencing homelessness. Welfare-reform legislation passed in 1996 resulted in much lower public benefit participation rates among legal non-citizen households; even qualified immigrant families living in poverty are prevented from receiving aid by complex application rules, confusion over eligibility criteria, limited English skills among applicants, and fear that participation may disqualify family members from obtaining permanent residency status (“green cards”). In “mixed-status” households, fear of deportation keeps undocumented parents from applying for assistance for their qualifying U.S.-born children. Harsh legislative measures taken in recent years by states seeking to address unlawful immigration have heightened deportation concerns among Hispanics and have further deterred eligible low-income immigrants from seeking assistance. These laws also place organizations at risk of prosecution for aiding illegal immigrant households in need of social and homeless services.

Several factors place many Hispanic families and individuals in a financially unstable position. Nearly two-fifths (38.0%) of Hispanics have less than a high school degree, a rate almost

four times higher than for whites (9.6%). In 2011 a Hispanic full-time employee with a bachelor’s degree or higher earned one-sixth (16.5%) less in weekly full-time salary (\$1,000) than a white worker (\$1,165) with the same level of education. In 2009 Hispanic households had approximately one-eighteenth of the accumulated wealth that whites possessed (\$6,325, compared with \$113,149), leaving them with less to fall back on in times of economic hardship. This amount decreased by two-thirds (65.5%) between 2005 and 2009, due primarily to the housing-market crash, which strongly affected states with large Hispanic populations. (The wealth of white households saw a 15.6% decline during the same time period.)

Differences exist within the broad “Hispanic” category, which disguise factors that can increase vulnerability to homelessness—situations linked to national origin, generational status (such as being foreign-born versus being third-generation), immigration status, and level of English-language proficiency. For example, the poverty rate among foreign-born families originating in Mexico was 36.0% in 2011, as opposed to 16.4% for families born in South America. More than two-thirds (70.7%) of U.S. families born in Mexico have limited English-language skills, compared with less than half (45.9%) of South American-born families, making it even more difficult to achieve economic stability.

Like blacks and American Indian or Alaskan Natives, Hispanics face prejudice and other substantial access barriers to decent employment, education, and housing not experienced by whites. While the nature and expression of biases vary by racial and ethnic group, the effects are similar: lower educational attainment and earned income, considerable gaps in wealth accumulation, and higher rates of poverty and homelessness. At the same time, it is important to note that society is dynamic. Immigration reform under consideration by the 113th Congress may help reduce some barriers to accessing services by offering a path to citizenship for some undocumented immigrants already living in the United States. ■