



Geography of Homelessness, Part 4: Examining Urban Homelessness

While homelessness exists in all places, a majority of people experiencing homelessness are experiencing it in urban areas. Approximately 77 percent of the U.S. homeless population in 2007 was counted in places considered completely urban, and over 60 percent of the homeless population was living in metropolitan areas of greater than 1,000,000 people. Because of this heavy urban bias, trends in homelessness nationally largely reflect trends in urban homelessness. However, closer examination of urban homelessness reveals interesting variation among urban places, particularly when comparing major cities to other urban areas. Between 2005 and 2007 homelessness in major cities increased by 4 percent, while homelessness in other urban areas (smaller cities, suburbs, etc.) as well as the rest of the country decreased by approximately 10 percent. Major cities also have rates of homelessness that are much higher than other urban places. In 2007, major cities had a rate of 43 people per 10,000 compared with 29 people per 10,000 for all urban places and 22 people per 10,000 nationally.

Defining the Urban Category

In Parts 1 through 3 of the *Geography of Homelessness* series, we examined homeless by geographic type, ranging from Urban to Rural. This provided some valuable insights into the differences in homelessness between geographic types; however, one limitation of the analysis is that it failed to capture the variation in homelessness within the large and heterogeneous urban category. As defined in Part 1 of the *Geography of Homelessness* series, Urban Continuum of Care (CoCs) are made up entirely of counties or places considered urban using the urban/rural distinction from the Housing Assistance Council. Still, there is much variation in size, density and overall urban character of CoCs within the Urban category. It includes big cities like New York City, with over 8 million residents, suburban communities like Fairfax County, VA and small communities like Amarillo, Texas, with less than 200,000 residents. In this fourth installment of the *Geography of Homelessness*, we examine homelessness within the urban category by further categorizing the 295 urban CoCs into smaller and more homogeneous groups and comparing homeless population size, rates of homelessness, and changes across these urban geographic types.

To determine the type of urban area we used criteria similar to that used by the Economic Research Service at the U.S Department of Agriculture to develop the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes.¹ The table below provides the name of each category, the definition as it applies to this brief, and examples of CoCs in each category.

¹ <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Rurality/RuralUrbCon/>

Table 1. Category Definitions

Name	Definition	Examples
Major City	CoCs that contain a Major City with a population of over 500,000.	<i>Major City CoCs:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • San Diego City, CA • New York City, NY • Columbus/Franklin County, OH • Atlanta/DeKalb, Fulton Counties, GA
Major MSA	CoCs that do not contain a major city, but are within a Major Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) with a population of over 1,000,000.	<i>Major MSA CoCs:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ft Lauderdale/Broward County, FL • Minneapolis/Hennepin County, MN • Cambridge, MA • Sacramento City and County, CA
Large MSA	CoCs within a Large MSA with a population of over 250,000 but less than 1,000,000.	<i>Large MSA CoCs:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colorado Springs/El Paso County, CO • Honolulu, HI • Albany City & County, NY • Spokane, WA
Small MSA	CoCs within in a Small MSA with a population fewer than 250,000.	<i>Small MSA CoCs:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bangor/Penobscot County, ME • Racine City & County, WI • Amarillo, TX • Sioux City/Dakota, Woodbury Counties, IA

The distribution of Urban CoCs by type is shown in Figure 1. Overwhelmingly, the Urban CoCs are located within Major MSAs (n = 130) or Large MSAs (n=101). Major Cities and CoCs in Small MSAs represent only a small share of the total number of Urban CoCs (n = 33 and 31, respectively).

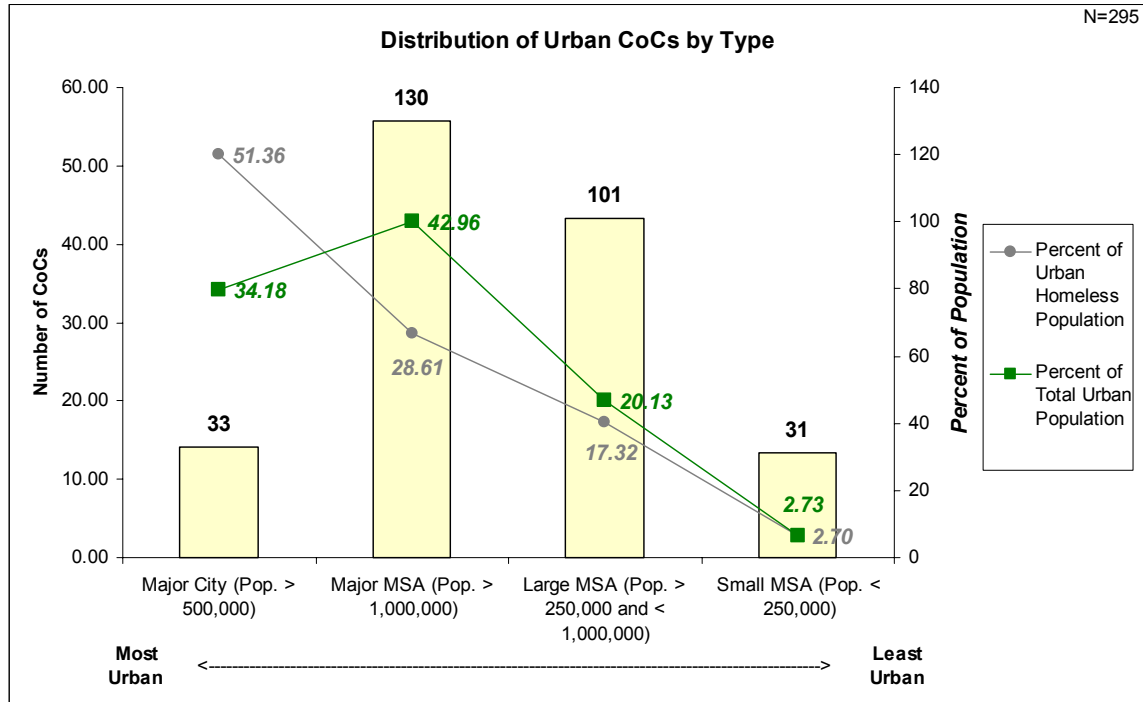
Homeless Population by Urban Geographic Type

As shown in Figure 1, there is a direct correlation between how urban a category is and the percent of urban homelessness in that category. As CoCs decrease in population size, the share of the urban homeless population counted in those CoCs declines as well. Major Cities account for over half (51 percent) of the urban homeless population, followed by Major MSAs (29 percent), Large MSAs (17 percent, and finally, the least urban category, Small MSAs (2.7 percent).

Interestingly, the distribution of the urban homeless population is not reflective of the distribution of the total urban population. Though Large and Small MSAs account for similar shares of the total urban population (20 and 2.7 percent, respectively) as they do of the urban homeless population, this is not the case for the two more urban categories. While accounting for over half of the urban homeless population, Major Cities account for just one-third of the

total urban population.² Conversely, Major MSAs comprise a larger share (43 percent) of the total urban population than they do the urban homeless population. This indicates that the higher level of homelessness, in Major Cities particularly, is not completely accounted for by population size.

Figure 1. Distribution of Urban CoCs by Type



Population Change between 2005 and 2007

Between 2005 and 2007, the United States population grew by 4.5 percent.³ The total population of the 295 Urban CoCs grew by roughly the same amount (4.3 percent). Population growth across the four urban types ranged from a low of 2.8 percent in Major MSAs to a high of 5.6 percent in small MSAs.

At the same time, however, most urban areas experienced declines in the numbers of people experiencing homelessness. Overall, urban homelessness declined by 9.4 percent between 2005 and 2007, a trend that corresponds to the reduction in homelessness nationally. However, as shown in figure 2, something very different occurred in Major Cities during the same time period. This was the only group to experience an increase in homelessness (4 percent) from 2005 to 2007. Major Cities also experienced a 13.4 percent increase in the number of homeless persons in families with children, which is in stark contrast to the changes in family homelessness in the other urban types, which all experienced decreases in homelessness among persons in families. Specifically, Major, Large, and Small MSAs experienced declines ranging from just over 27 percent (major MSAs) to over 46 percent (Large MSAs) (see table 2). The intensity of these declines brings increased attention to the fact that Major Cities experienced an increase.

² Urban Homeless population and total population are defined here as the population within the 295 CoCs that are considered urban.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, 2005, 2007

The one population for which the direction of change was consistent across all four urban categories was the chronically homeless population. As a whole, urban areas saw a decline of just less than 29 percent among their chronically homeless population – a trend that also corresponds to the national decline of 28 percent. Major Cities and Major MSA CoCs had rates of change just less than that (both just over 26 percent) while Large MSAs and Small MSAs had rates that were higher (38 and 34 percent, respectively).

Figure 2. Percentage Change in Homeless Population by Urban Type

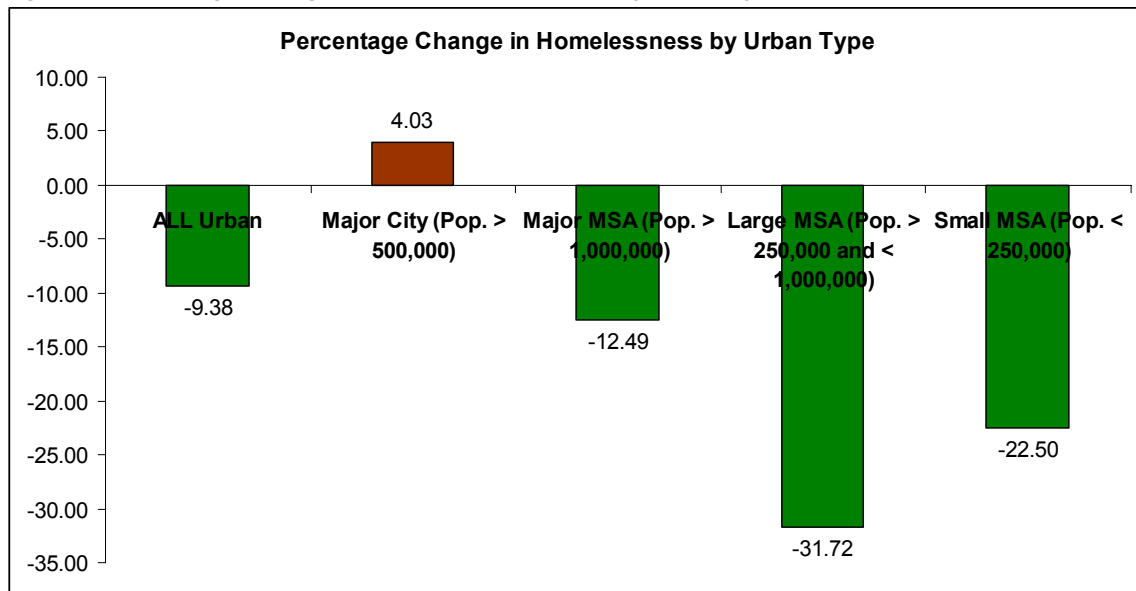


Table 2. Changes in Homeless Subpopulations by Urban Type

Urban Type	N=	Percent Change - Homeless	Percent Change – Chronically Homeless	Percent Change – Persons in Families with Children	Percent Change - Total Population
Major City	33	4.03	-26.35	13.39	5.37
Major MSA	130	-12.49	-26.07	-27.11	2.84
Large MSA	101	-31.72	-38.16	-46.43	5.32
Small MSA	31	-22.50	-34.55	-39.57	5.64
All Urban CoCs	295	-9.38	-28.75	-17.48	4.26

Rates of Homelessness

In Part 2 of the Geography of Homelessness series it was reported that in 2007, Urban Areas had the highest rate of homelessness in 2007, with 29 people per 10,000. The growth in population from 2005 to 2007 across urban types matched by declines (in most categories) in homeless populations, resulted in lower rates of homelessness for each urban category in 2007.

Within the Urban category, the rates of homelessness vary widely. Major Cities had the highest rates of homelessness in both 2005 and 2007, with rates of 44 and 43 per 10,000, respectively (see table 3). Due to a growth in population that outpaced their growth in homelessness, the rates of homelessness in Major Cities still declined. CoCs in Major MSAs had the lowest rates of homelessness in both years with rates of 22 people per 10,000 in 2005 and 19 people per 10,000 in 2007. The two groups with more significant declines in homelessness experienced more significant declines in rates of

homelessness, with the rates in Large MSAs decreasing by over 13 points from 38 to 25 people per 10,000 in 2007 and Small MSAs decreasing by 10 points from 39 to 29 people per 10,000.

Table 3. Rates of Homelessness by Urban Type per 10,000 people

	Rate 2007	Rate 2005
Major City (Pop. > 500,000)	43	44
Major MSA (Pop. > 1,000,000)	19	22
Large MSA (Pop. > 250,000 and < 1,000,000)	25	38
Small MSA (Pop. < 250,000)	29	39
All Urban CoCs	29	33

This closer examination of the urban category has revealed some interesting if unexpected differences between urban geographic types. The trends in Major Cities departed from the other categories when comparing homeless population size, rates and changes between 2005 and 2007. Below is a summary of the findings.

- Major Cities account for a larger share of the urban homeless population (51 percent) than they do the total urban population (34 percent). Major MSAs, however, account for a larger share of the total urban population (43 percent) and a smaller share (29 percent) of the urban homeless population.
- Major Cities experienced an increase (4 percent) in homelessness while all other categories experienced declines.
- Major Cities saw an increase of over 13 percent in the number of homeless persons in families while all other urban types experienced significant declines.
- Rates of homelessness are highest for Major Cities (43 people per 10,000) and lowest for Major MSAs (19 people per 10,000). Each urban type had rates of homelessness that declined between 2005 and 2007.
- The less urban categories (Large and Small MSAs) experienced drastic changes in their homeless populations and in their rates of homelessness between 2005 and 2007.