Public Assistance and Homeless Shelter Trajectories

Francisca García-Cobián Richter, PhD, Claudia Coulton, PhD, Robert Fischer, PhD,
Nina Lalich, MSPH, and Ashley Hajski, PhD

Summary

The devastating economic impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic forced more families to struggle with the uncertainty of a stable job, a stable home, and even a stable provision of food. Although official data on the increase in homelessness will not be available until 2022 or even 2023,[1] the threat of homelessness became a reality for the 6.4 million households nationwide, who by the middle of 2021 were behind on their rent.[2] Eviction moratoria and rental assistance programs provided temporary relief to households in distress, yet the coronavirus pandemic has made more palpable the value of a robust social safety net to support housing stability and wellbeing for low-income families during extraordinary times.

In this Brief, we discuss findings from our research on homelessness and public assistance participation prior to the pandemic, with a focus on how these findings can inform homelessness policy in a post-pandemic era. In a recent study, researchers at the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development (Poverty Center) investigated the extent to which individuals and families in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, were connected to the social safety net in and around the time they (first) entered homeless shelter and whether these supports prevented future reentries into shelter (Richter, et al. 2021). This study demonstrates the extent to which public assistance programs intersect the trajectories of people experiencing homelessness and suggests that more can be done to protect households and propel them into more stable housing. We provide a brief summary of the study findings and offer some examples of local efforts aimed at ending homelessness and improving access to the social safety net.

_____

[1] Comprehensive national-level data on homelessness was last collected in January 2020, before COVID-19 was declared a national emergency. The pandemic is also responsible for disruptions in counts of unsheltered people in 2021. The National Alliance to end homelessness estimates that the most reliable data on homelessness will not be fully updated until late 2022 or early 2023. https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-2021/
[2] National Equity Atlas. Retrieved on 08/26/2021. https://nationalequityatlas.org/rent-debt

JACK, JOSEPH AND MORTON MANDEL
SCHOOL OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES
Case Western Reserve
UNIVERSITY

Center on
Urban Poverty and
Community Development

Purpose of Study, Data and Approach

Research has argued that homelessness arises from the interaction of dire personal circumstances and the characteristics of the housing markets in which individuals live (O'Flaherty 2004). As part of the social safety net, public assistance benefits and access to housing subsidies are meant to reduce the impacts of poverty and hardships that individuals face within their local environments and, consequently, ought to reduce the risk of homelessness. Thus, policy must understand the extent to which individuals facing severe housing instability are connected to the social safety net and whether these supports lead to improved housing stability.

Our study takes a small but important step in the direction of addressing these questions. We focus primarily on participation in three main programs for which we can track adults' quarterly enrollment around the time of homeless shelter use. These are the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and access to place-based housing assistance (referred to as public housing). We are also able to examine receipt of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and enrollment in Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) at the time individuals receive homeless services. Table 1 provides a brief description of these programs.

Table 1. Public Assistance Programs Examined in the Study

Program	Description	Requirements in Ohio/Cuyahoga County
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	Up to 36 months of conditional cash support for very low-income house-holds with children.	Ohio Works First has a gross monthly income limit for a family of three of $905; Benefits are conditional on meeting work requirements. https://jfs.ohio.gov/factsheets/owf.pdf
Supplemental Security Income (SSI)	Cash assistance to low-income, low-resource individuals if over 65 years of age or blind or disabled.	Countable income limits and resource limits apply. https://oh.db101.org/oh/programs/income_support/ssi/program2d.htm
Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)	Cash benefits to people with disabilities who qualify because they used to work or have a parent who worked.	No proof of financial need is required but it is dependent on work history and enrollment in Social Security. https://ood.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/ood/individuals-with-disabilities/services/disability-determination
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	Debit card-based benefit for the purchase of food only. Time limit and work requirements for "able bodied" individuals ages 18-59, without dependents.	Family income cannot exceed 130% federal poverty guidelines unless a member is over 60 years of age or has a disability. https://jfs.ohio.gov/factsheets/foodassistance.pdf
Public housing	Rental subsidy in public housing unit for low-income families, seniors, and individuals with disabilities.	Household income cannot exceed 80% of the county median income. https://www.cmha.net/publichousing/index

This study focuses on participation in public assistance programs among adults entering emergency homeless shelters in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, between 2013 and 2017. The data come from the Child Household Integrated Longitudinal Data (CHILD) system spanning more than 20 years of data, developed and maintained by the Poverty Center under the highest standards of privacy protection. Data on homeless shelter use over time comes from the Cuyahoga County Office of Homeless Services' Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Enrollment in SNAP and TANF comes from the Cuyahoga County Department of Job and Family Services, and public housing use that precedes and follows a recorded entry into homeless shelter comes from the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA). The SNAP program provides food assistance for eligible low-income households that receive a monthly benefit allowing them to purchase groceries. SNAP benefit receipt is subject to work requirements for able-bodied individuals aged 16-59 without

dependents. The TANF program provides monthly cash assistance to qualifying family units with children. TANF is a time-limited program that also has stringent work requirements. By linking records from the County's HMIS system to enrollment data from SNAP, TANF, and CMHA we obtain a longitudinal depiction of households' program participation patterns and shelter use.[3]

Using a technique called group-based multi-trajectory modeling or GBTM (Nagin, 2011), we identify patterns of program participation, personal characteristics and shelter and public housing use for these individuals. Group membership is determined by program participation during the quarter of the first observed shelter entry and the four quarters prior. These five quarters encompass the pre-period. Three groups of individuals emerged based on our analysis of personal information provided upon entry into shelter, and spells of SNAP and TANF enrollment, and public housing access during the pre-period.

Study Findings

There were about 15,500 adults with records of homeless shelter use in the county during 2013 and 2017. We take a more in-depth look into the characteristics of individuals by group (Table 2), their use of shelter in the four quarters following their first entry - the post period, and their change in program participation upon shelter entry (Figure 1).

The social construct of race continues to exert a heavy influence on who is granted or denied access to opportunity, benefits, and privileges. Thus, we provide statistics on race as reported in the administrative records seeking to highlight these persistent inequities.
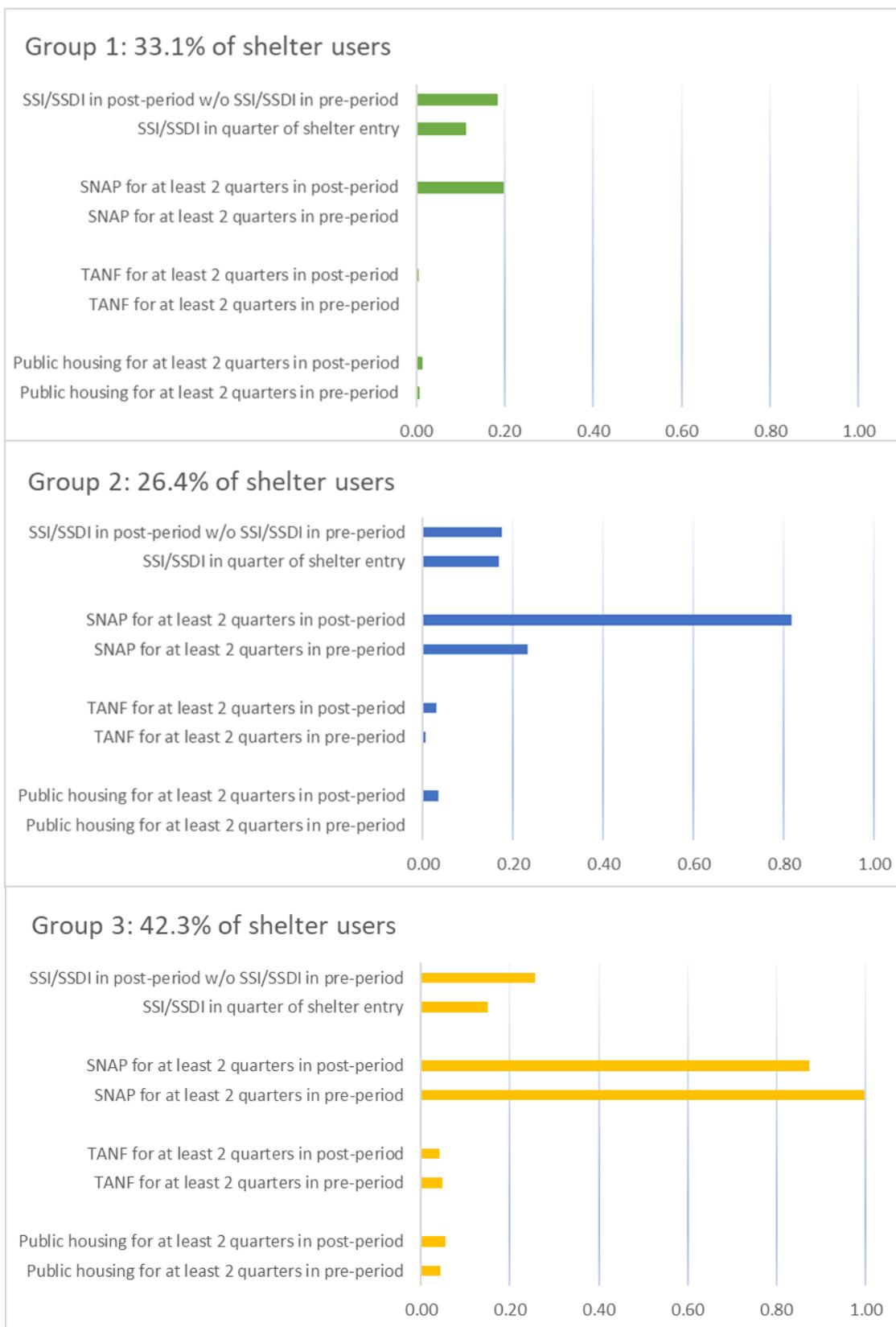
As we see in Table 2, those in Group 1 (31.3% of shelter users) are least likely to have entered shelter with a child and more likely to be over 60 years of age relative to the other two groups (12 percent). Figure 1 shows that Group 1 can be characterized as having the least program participation prior to shelter entry, followed by a moderate increase in enrollment in the post period. Their use of housing subsidies is virtually unchanged from the pre to the post period, at 1 percent.

Table 2: Characteristics of individuals at shelter entry by assigned trajectory group

	Group 1 (N=5543)		Group 2 (N=3068)		Group 3 (N=6886)	
	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd
Individuals with children	0.09	0.29	0.13	0.34	0.20	0.40
Male	0.73	0.45	0.71	0.45	0.61	0.49
Race/Ethnicity:						
White	0.32	0.47	0.30	0.46	0.19	0.39
Black	0.59	0.49	0.63	0.48	0.76	0.42
Hispanic	0.07	0.26	0.07	0.26	0.04	0.21
Asian	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.04	0.00	0.04
Other/unknown	0.01	0.10	0.00	0.07	0.00	0.06
Age at shelter entry:						
(18-29)	0.26	0.44	0.29	0.45	0.28	0.45
(30-60)	0.62	0.49	0.65	0.48	0.64	0.48
60 plus	0.12	0.32	0.06	0.24	0.08	0.28
Disability condition	0.23	0.42	0.21	0.41	0.36	0.48
Domestic violence survivor	0.13	0.34	0.16	0.36	0.18	0.39

---

[3] We carefully follow human subject research standards, which includes Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, and we are dedicated to providing critical data analysis as well as nuanced presentation to protect against inaccuracies. However, even adherence to high standards of data integrity has limitations. All administrative data has the potential for bias due to the proven history of over-surveillance and unequal treatment of poor communities, particularly communities of color. We acknowledge that these biases could impact the administrative data that we receive. Our Center is guided by these considerations as we work to provide an ethical and accurate reflection of the communities with which we work.

Figure 1. Program participation at and after first observed shelter use by trajectory group. Pre-period refers to the quarter of first observed shelter entry and the four quarters prior. Post-period refres to the four quarters following the quarter of first observed shelter entry.

Also seen in Figure 1, Group 2 (26.4% of shelter users) experienced the largest increase in SNAP and TANF enrollment between the pre and post periods, with SNAP participation increasing from 23 percent to 82 percent and TANF participation increasing from 1 percent to 3 percent. Receipt of SSI/SSDI in the quarter of shelter entry is the highest in this group at 17 percent. Similar to Group 1, we see gains in SSI/SSDI enrollment for the subset of individuals for whom we can verify enrollment in the post period.

Table 2 shows Group 3 as the largest group (42.3% of shelter users) and includes a higher share of individuals identified as Black, individuals with children, women, victims of domestic violence, and persons with disabilities. Regarding program participation (Figure 1), their rate of SNAP benefits receipt drops from virtually 100 percent to 88 percent over the two periods, and TANF drops from 5 to 4 percent. Among those for whom we can verify SSI/SSDI enrollment in the post shelter period, we see that 26 percent were not enrolled in the quarter of shelter entry, signaling the largest gain in enrollment in Group 3 relative to Groups 1 and 2. This group is also the one with the highest rate of public housing subsidies at 6 percent in the post period.

Following the quarter of shelter entry, our data allows us to observe any shelter use over the next four quarters. The use of shelter in the post period that we observe can be due to continued shelter stay or exits and subsequent reentries into shelter. In this post period, 48% of people in Group 1 are seen to use shelter, while 56% and 55% of those in Groups 2 and 3 use shelter (not shown in figures).

We then use statistical models (within-individual or fixed effects models) to explore the relationship between patterns of program enrollment and subsequent emergency shelter use in the next eight quarters. The analysis is segmented by trajectory groups and also performed for the subset of individuals who enter shelter with children. In this way, we blend static and dynamic characteristics of individuals in the same local environment to understand their experiences and explore how their connection to the social safety net relates to subsequent homeless shelter spells.

The model estimates that for all groups, SNAP enrollment in each quarter is positively associated with shelter use in the same quarter. This finding suggests that some individuals may enroll in SNAP while being under the umbrella of shelter services. However, we also find that SNAP enrollment in a given quarter is negatively associated with shelter use in the following quarter, suggesting that SNAP can prevent extreme housing instability. In the case of TANF, the model finds a similar relationship held only for Group 2. Not surprisingly, we do not find evidence of protective effects for Groups 1 and 3 since their use of TANF remains virtually unchanged between the pre and post periods. Regarding housing subsidies, the model confirms that individuals are less likely to return to shelter when they have access to an affordable unit through public housing, particularly in the case of Group 3, featuring the highest rate of individuals with children, domestic violence, and some form of disability.

Notably, the results of the model pertaining to SNAP apply to all three groups even though they exhibit very different levels of connection with these social programs prior to their first observed shelter use. This result suggests that while efforts to increase connection may be very different across groups, they deserve further exploration as a means to improve housing stability.

Our findings suggest that at current levels of program participation, increasing participation and expanding the supply of housing subsidies can be protective against reentry into shelter. The analysis calls for a deeper exploration of whether those who qualify for benefits are able to access them when most needed and on how we can move toward more timely, targeted, preventive social interventions directed to households facing extreme housing hardships. For example, our analysis showed that Group 1 is least likely to re-enter shelter and less reliant on SNAP and TANF. Compared to the other groups, Group 1 includes a larger share of individuals over the age of 60. It would be important to explore if their lower shelter use is a sign of stable housing arrangements or if they might be spending more time on the street, in hospital emergency rooms, in the prison system, or if they are at higher risk of death. The integration of data across multiple systems would allow for this in-depth characterization of groups.

Our analysis calls for a deeper exploration of whether those that qualify for benefits are able to access them when most needed and how we can move towards more timely, targeted, preventive social interventions directed to households facing extreme housing hardships.

Discussion and Local Perspectives

Through this analysis, we identify three groups of individuals entering homeless shelter with markedly different levels of connection with the social safety net. We find that groups with low or nearly zero rates of SNAP and TANF enrollment prior to shelter entry experience an increase in enrollment in the subsequent four quarters. On the other hand, a third group, consisting of individuals with close to 100 percent SNAP enrollment during the quarter of shelter entry, experience a subsequent drop in enrollment, both in SNAP and TANF. Receipt of SSI/SSDI as reported by the HMIS system in the quarter of shelter entry ranges between 11 percent in the least connected group to 17 percent. Access to public housing increases for all groups but remains at very low levels. Yet, regardless of clear differences in levels and trends of connection with the social safety net, we find evidence to suggest that at current levels of enrollment, SNAP and to a lesser extent TANF play a role in preventing extreme housing instability. Furthermore, the analysis hints at the fact that individuals entering shelter may be receiving support to apply for SNAP or TANF benefits as well as SSI/SSDI.

Efforts have been made in the past two decades to increase coverage and ease enrollment in public benefits programs (Jones 2011), but our results suggest that more can be done. For instance, the Department of Health and Human Services (2013) provided guidelines for partnerships between TANF agencies and local homeless providers to coordinate and streamline services for individuals experiencing homelessness and improve the targeting of scarce resources. And a study by HUD (Burt et al., 2010) points out that communities that were more successful in improving homeless people's access to mainstream benefits had significantly increased the degree of coordination and collaboration between homeless assistance providers and mainstream agencies.

Until recently, Cuyahoga County operated the SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery program (SOAR). This program helps increase access to Supplemental Security Income/Social Security Disability Insurance (SSI/SSDI) benefits for people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness and have a serious mental illness, medical impairment, or substance use disorder (Dennis et al., 2011). However, the program concluded in 2018 due to lack of funding.

Currently, in Cuyahoga County a multi-agency partnership is operating under the vision that people experiencing and exiting homelessness should have access to the housing, public benefits (SNAP and Medicaid), and employment supports they need to achieve stability.[4] The aim is to systematize, streamline and enhance the processes by which clients are connected with benefits administered by Cuyahoga JFS, specifically SNAP and Medicaid - preventing loss of benefits as a downstream result of homelessness- and thus providing a more stable baseline to access employment opportunities and gain housing stability.

As part of the partnership, Cuyahoga Job and Family Services (JFS) has dedicated a Case Manager (DCM) to homeless families served in permanent supportive housing programs, emergency shelter, and rapid rehousing. Coordinated Intake and Assessment services are operated by FrontLine Service (FLS). A Benefits Liaison hired by FLS, serves as a single point of contact between family homeless service providers and JFS. Enterprise Community Partners provides support for implementation, coordination, and monitoring for continuous improvement of this Dedicated Case Management partnership. Implemented as a pilot in 2018, the partnership is seeking to promote utilization across the continuum of care.

We conclude with three main insights drawn from conversations with agency partners[5] :

First, there is still much to do to ease access to programs for clients and funding for agencies. More streamlined and nimble application processes would not penalize clients facing scarce communication resources (processes often involve phone calls with long waiting periods) or those with mental health. Additionally, it would be valuable to provide navigation support -as with the SOAR program or the Benefits Liaison- in an accessible manner.

---

[4] Dedicated JFS Case Management for Homeless Families: Workflow & Recommendations for Pilot Expansion. Internal report by Enterprise Community Partners. March 2020.
[5] We are thankful to the following agency staff for providing insightful feedback to our report and sharing their perspectives: Angela D'Orazio (Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland), Claire Gauntner (Enterprise), Kate Lodge (A Place 4 Me, YWCA of Greater Cleveland), and D'Angela Tanks (FrontLine Service).

On the agency side, the ease of application requirements for agencies to seek funding would be key to avoid losing valuable programming such as SOAR. And having a partner serve as central source of communications regarding grant opportunities within the Continuum of Care would help increase resources to connect clients with social programs.

Second, in tandem with the need to improve access to public assistance programs such as SNAP or TANF, there is a need to revise eligibility conditions of these programs to avoid benefit cliffs and provide meaningful support for employment and housing stability. Any revisions to eligibility and application processes would be informed by feedback from navigators working directly with clients.

Third, it will be important to design well thought emergency rental assistance programs and expand access to rental subsidies to cover all eligible households. Along with devastation, the pandemic has seeded new ideas to reduce homelessness, such as the repurposing of empty hotels and unused business properties into affordable housing (Padgett and Herman, 2021), as well as implementing a phased-in expansion of the Housing Choice Voucher program (Fischer et al., 2021). Expanding access to affordable housing constitutes a robust primary prevention mechanism against homelessness and a means to advance racial equity in housing stability with benefits for all.

References

Burt, Martha R., Jenneth Carpenter, Ann V. Denton, Samuel G. Hall, Kathryn A. Henderson, John A. Hornik, Garrett E. Moran, and Debra J. Rog. 2010. Strategies for Improving Homeless People's Access to Mainstream Benefits and Services. Available at https://www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/strategiesaccessbenefitsservices.pdf

Dennis, Deborah, Margaret Lassiter, William H. Connelly, and Kristin S. Lupfer. 2011. Helping adults who are homeless gain disability benefits: The SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) Program. Psychiatric Services 62 (11): 1373–76.

Fischer, W., Acosta, S., and Erik Gartland. 2021. "More Housing Vouchers: Most Important Step to Help More People Afford Stable Homes. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities", May 13, 202. https://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/more-housing-vouchers-most-important-step-to-help-more-people-afford-stable-homes

Fischer, Robert L., Francisca Garcia-Cobian Richter, Elizabeth Anthony, Nina Lalich, and Claudia Coulton. 2019. Leveraging administrative data to better serve children and families. Public Administration Review 79 (5): 675–83.

Jones, Ty. 2011. SNAP's homeless shelter deduction can provide much-needed help for homeless individuals and families. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Available from https://www.cbpp.org/research/snaps-homeless-shelter-deduction-can-provide-much-needed-help-for-homeless-individuals-and

Nagin, Daniel S., Bobby L. Jones, Valeria Lima Passos, and Richard E. Tremblay. 2018. Group-based multi-trajectory modeling. Statistical Methods in Medical Research 27 (7): 2015–23.

O'Flaherty, B. 2004. Wrong person and wrong place: For homelessness, the conjunction is what matters. Journal of Housing Economics 13 (1): 1–15.

Padgett, D. K., & Herman, D. 2021. From Shelters to Hotels: An Enduring Solution to Ending Homelessness for Thousands of Americans. Hospital and Community Psychiatry, 72(9), 986-987. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.202100170

Richter, F. G.-C., Coulton, C., Fischer, R. L., & Lalich, N. 2021. Public Assistance and Homeless Shelter Trajectories. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 693(1), 123–140. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716221993380

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2013. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families information memorandum. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/resource/tanf-acf-im-2013-01