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Metropolitan Neighborhoods with Sheltered Homeless Populations: Evidence from the 1990 and 2000 Censuses

Barrett A. Lee and Chad R. Farrell

"Despite some dispersal during the 1990s, critical mass homeless neighborhoods are still found largely in struggling central city locales."

Findings

An analysis of metropolitan neighborhoods with emergency and transitional shelters, using special decennial census data from 1990 and 2000, reveals that:

- **Critical mass neighborhoods—defined as census tracts with sheltered homeless populations of 100 or more—are disproportionately located in large metropolitan areas.** Of the 358 critical mass neighborhoods in the U.S. in 2000, 271 (76 percent) were captured by a sample of 49 large metro areas. While the number of these neighborhoods fell slightly during the 1990s, this likely reflects the growing popularity of smaller shelters and non-shelter housing programs rather than a reduction in the nation's homeless population.

- **Sheltered homeless people constitute a visible but rarely dominant group in critical mass neighborhoods.** In large metro areas, critical mass homeless neighborhoods contained an average of 245 sheltered homeless, representing just over 10 percent of the population. Only three of the 271 critical mass neighborhoods analyzed had a majority sheltered homeless population.

- **The vast majority (86 percent) of critical mass neighborhoods in large metro areas are located within central cities and they tend to be highly transitory in nature.** Of the neighborhoods identified as critical mass in 1990 or 2000, only one-fourth held that designation at both points in time. The average critical mass neighborhood moved farther from downtown during the 1990s, though large sheltered populations continue to reside close to downtowns in some cities.

- **Although the sheltered homeless account for only a small share of critical mass neighborhood populations, these neighborhoods tend to exhibit high levels of disadvantage generally.** Compared to adjacent neighborhoods and others within the central city, critical mass neighborhoods have much higher levels of unemployment, poverty, and disability among their residents, and higher levels of vacancy and overcrowding in their largely rental housing stock.

Shelter downsizing, closure and relocation, as well as the creation of smaller facilities for specialized groups, appear to have spread sheltered homelessness to different locations throughout the metropolis over the 1990s. Still, critical mass homeless neighborhoods are found largely in struggling central city locales. The impact of current policies and economic conditions on the location and condition of these neighborhoods and their residents should motivate further research.

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Introduction

Americans expect a lot from their neighborhoods. Many believe that the ideal neighborhood is primarily if not exclusively residential in nature, a safe haven of single-family homes whose owner occupants keep up their property, get along well together, and want the best for their children. According to this belief, any encroachment of commercial or non-residential land uses into an area should be resisted, given its potential for undermining the presumed beneficial aspects of neighborhood context. Even quasi-residential facilities such as group homes and halfway houses—no matter how merciful in purpose—are regarded with suspicion by residents. Human services administrators nevertheless try to place their clients in "normal" neighborhoods out of conviction that the desirable features of these settings facilitate treatment, recovery, and rehabilitation, frequently creating tension. In some neighborhoods, preferences for residential purity win out; in others, facilities appear that cater to victims of domestic violence, persons with mental disabilities, HIV/AIDS patients, substance abusers, and similar special-needs groups.

This study examines metropolitan neighborhoods with emergency and transitional shelters that house substantial numbers of homeless people. These neighborhoods, which we label *critical mass*, often have long histories of serving an impoverished clientele, as epitomized by the traditional "skid row" district. But critical mass neighborhoods of more recent vintage are also evident, some in areas farther away from the city center. One might anticipate the landscape of critical mass homeless neighborhoods to have shifted since the early 1980s, when a variety of forces converged to increase the size of the U.S. homeless population.[1] To date, however, these neighborhoods remain largely unexplored.

Using census data, this paper asks four key questions about critical mass neighborhoods from 1990–2000: (1) In which metropolitan areas are they most and least common? (2) How visible are sheltered homeless persons in critical mass neighborhoods? (3) How do the intra-metropolitan locations of these neighborhoods compare in 2000 and 1990? (4) What are critical mass neighborhoods like in terms of their demographic, socioeconomic, and housing characteristics?

Answers to the four questions are difficult to predict because multiple factors shape the distribution of shelters at the local level.[2] The conventional pattern—concentration in the central city core—reflects several influences: historical inertia; access to public transportation; cheaper land and lower rental costs; the presence of buildings and zoning suitable for homeless-targeted services; and limited opposition to such services in marginal downtown space. By minimizing the distances among service facilities, this concentrated pattern can be considered an efficient approach to helping homeless people meet their basic needs. Funding formulas for federal homelessness assistance also tend to favor cities, thus guaranteeing at least a portion of the shelters that serve the homeless population will be located there.

Of course, some would rather see shelters and the populations they house located outside the city center. Merchants, developers, and government officials tend to view the spatial concentration of shelters as an impediment to the revitalization of the central business district, not to mention a deterrent to shoppers, tourists, and conventioneers. Consequently, policies ranging from the closure or relocation of shelters to the enforcement of bans on loitering and panhandling have been implemented, all with an eye toward dispersing the homeless population.[3] Dispersion is popular with some service providers as well. They see "cloistered" shelters in outlying locations as shielding vulnerable homeless groups, especially women and children, from the harmful effects of skid row. Moreover, decentralized shelters address an equity issue, improving access of the suburban poor to services.

Despite these rationales, attempts to open shelters in neighborhoods outside the urban core have typically been greeted with a NIMBY ("not in my backyard") response rather than with open arms. Middle-class residents use a variety of tactics to block shelters, citing the threat posed to property values, safety, public health, and overall quality of life.[4] Similar opposition has increasingly come from low-income areas, whose residents—often racial and ethnic minorities—argue that their neighborhoods are dumping grounds for facilities unwanted elsewhere.

These competing pressures between concentration and dispersion suggest the American metropolis may harbor complex and varied spatial distributions of critical mass homeless neighborhoods. Few traditional skid rows persist in unaltered form, but neither are we aware of cases in which the sheltered homeless population is spread evenly throughout a central city and its surrounding suburbs. One likelihood is that, given the magnitude of their homelessness problems, the largest metropolitan areas will have the greatest number of critical mass neighborhoods. We also expect these neighborhoods to be more decentralized in 2000 than 1990, in part because of the growing recognition and use of strategies designed to make shelters more acceptable in the eyes of the public. Smaller facilities in particular may keep the visibility of the sheltered homeless population within limits tolerable to residents across a range of neighborhoods.[5]

The narrow focus of our analysis deserves emphasis. Relying on census data, though integral to our ability to

describe the demographic makeup of neighborhoods with sheltered homeless people, precludes examination of the myriad policies and factors that have impacted the location and visibility of homelessness in the study areas. These data do not shed light on the size or characteristics of the total homeless population, either nationally or at the metropolitan level.[6] Generalizations about the size and composition of this population are hindered by the fact that many homeless persons spend their days and nights outdoors in hard-to-find spots. Others "double up" with friends and relatives, falling beyond the reach of census enumerators.

In addition to such coverage difficulties, census figures mask the dynamic, transient nature of homelessness. As single-point-in-time estimates, they understate the degree to which frequent entries into, and exits from, the homeless population influence the prevalence of homelessness over longer periods of time.[7] Simply put, our analysis cannot adequately account for individuals who experience only one or two brief episodes of homelessness during their lives.

At best, census data capture the "tip of the iceberg," both temporally and in terms of the types of homeless people covered. Yet by analyzing the changing location of sheltered homeless populations, and the neighborhood circumstances to which they are exposed, we obtain a clearer sense of how economic, policy, and other trends have affected some of society's most vulnerable individuals at the local level.

Methodology

Census Data on Homelessness

Data on sheltered homelessness in 2000 come from the Service-Based Enumeration (SBE) conducted during Census 2000. Over a three-day period (March 27–29), people without conventional housing were counted at shelters, soup kitchens, mobile food programs, and pre-designated outdoor sites.[8] For comparative purposes, our analysis also draws upon the 1990 S-Night (street and shelter) operation, a similar enumeration fielded by the Census Bureau a decade earlier.[9]

Once the 2000 SBE data were processed, Census Bureau officials proceeded cautiously, changing their minds at least twice about how the components of the SBE should be released. Ultimately, only emergency and transitional shelter results were made readily available, and only for census geographic units that met or exceeded a threshold of 100 persons in shelters. Census tabulations aggregated persons counted at soup kitchens, food programs, and outdoor sites in an "other non-institutional group quarters" category (along with persons in certain types of residential care facilities, in domestic violence shelters, and in hospital staff dormitories).[10]

For the nation as a whole, the SBE estimate of the sheltered homeless population provided by Census 2000 equals approximately 170,700. Due to the limitations already noted, the proportion of all homeless people captured in this estimate is impossible to ascertain. However, the rapid expansion of the shelter supply since the mid-1980s suggests the potential for a significant segment of the homeless population to be in shelters on any particular day.[11] Further, post-census evaluations of the 1990 S-Night data indicate that shelter counts are generally more accurate and complete than counts undertaken at non-shelter sites.[12] In both the S-Night and SBE efforts, Census staff used administrative records and contacts with knowledgeable local informants to develop a master list of emergency and transitional shelters prior to the enumeration date. Afterwards, a "mop-up" sought to include any shelters that were missed.

Critical Mass Neighborhoods in Metropolitan Areas

We rely on census tracts to represent metropolitan neighborhoods.[13] A *critical mass* neighborhood is defined as a tract with a sheltered homeless population of 100 or more at the time of the census. Members of this population might occupy one large shelter or be spread across several smaller ones. The critical mass threshold has been set at 100 partly for practical reasons, given the unavailability of 2000 SBE data below that level. But the threshold makes sense from a visibility standpoint as well. Homelessness is more likely to be noticed when a non-trivial number of shelter users are spatially concentrated. Shelters themselves are frequently accompanied by facilities and services (e.g., soup kitchens, second-hand clothing shops, health clinics) that attract unsheltered homeless clients, and they provide anchors for panhandling, loitering, and related forms of street behavior viewed as problematic by domiciled residents. Thus, awareness of homelessness should be heightened in critical mass neighborhoods.

Because of the heavy urban concentration of homeless people nationally, we limit our attention to critical mass neighborhoods in metropolitan areas.[14] A total of 331 Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) and Primary MSAs (PMSAs)—subsets of larger metropolitan areas of 1 million or more people—are recognized in Census 2000. We select a sample of 49 MSAs and PMSAs, and most of our results pertain to these areas. Included in this sample are 47 of the largest 50 metro areas in 2000—all surpassing the 1 million mark—plus Louisville (ranked 61st in population size) and Fresno (ranked 65th).[15]

Of the approximately 65,450 census tracts defined throughout the United States in 2000, only 358 qualify as critical mass, and the vast majority (353) fall inside metropolitan boundaries. Our sample of 49 metro areas

accounts for three-fourths (271 out of 358, or 75.7 percent) of all critical mass homeless tracts.[16] With respect to the 170,700 sheltered homeless people counted during the 2000 SBE, about half (80,300) are located in metropolitan critical mass tracts, and 39 percent (66,442) in the tracts that make up our 49-metro area sample. In short, most individuals staying in emergency or transitional shelters in metropolitan neighborhoods with significant homeless concentrations at the time of the last census (66,442 out of 80,300, or 83 percent) are represented in the data examined here.

Comparisons

Our analysis offers comparisons across metropolitan areas, within such areas, and over time. We begin by comparing the distribution of critical mass neighborhoods and sheltered homelessness across the 49 sample metro areas, paying special attention to 1990–2000 changes. We then examine differences in the visibility of homelessness in critical mass neighborhoods, and in the intrametropolitan location of such neighborhoods. Finally, we compare demographic, housing, and other characteristics of critical mass neighborhoods to those for adjacent neighborhoods (any tracts with boundaries touching a critical mass tract), for the surrounding central city, and for the metro area as a whole, using data from Census Summary Files 1 and 3.[17]

Findings

A. Critical mass neighborhoods—defined as census tracts with sheltered homeless populations of 100 or more—are disproportionately located in large metropolitan areas. Critical mass neighborhoods are, for the most part, a phenomenon associated with large metropolitan areas. Yet metro areas themselves are far from equal in their incidence of such neighborhoods. Our sample of 49 large metro areas captures roughly four-fifths of all sheltered homeless individuals residing in metropolitan critical mass neighborhoods nationwide during Census 2000. Among these large metro areas, New York dominates.[18] Table 1 shows that three of every ten critical mass census tracts in the metro sample are located in New York, as are over one-third of the sheltered homeless people who inhabit those tracts.

After New York, the Los Angeles-Long Beach metro area has the next most—but far fewer—sheltered homeless (6,394 vs. 23,111) and critical mass neighborhoods (16 vs. 81). The only other metro areas with at least 2,000 sheltered homeless in critical mass neighborhoods are Atlanta, Boston, and Seattle-Bellevue-Everett. These three areas also have eight or more critical mass neighborhoods, as do Philadelphia, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. (See Appendix A for statistics on all 49 metro areas.) By contrast, single critical mass neighborhoods and modest sheltered homeless populations (less than 300 persons) exist in several of the sample metropolises in 2000.

Overall, between 1990 and 2000, the number of critical mass neighborhoods declined slightly, as did the number of sheltered homeless in those neighborhoods. In the 49 metro areas, critical mass neighborhoods dropped from 297 to 271, and their combined sheltered homeless population fell off by roughly 16 percent. More metro areas registered declines than increases. Although it is tempting to attribute the downward trend to shrinkage of the national homeless population associated with the economic prosperity of the 1990s, little evidence exists to support that interpretation. More likely reasons include the growing popularity of smaller shelters and non-shelter housing programs, both of which would keep neighborhood shelter populations from reaching the critical mass threshold.[19] Increasing spatial dispersion of shelters—a possibility we consider later—could create a similar outcome.

Amid the overall decline in critical mass neighborhoods, the picture at the metropolitan level was mixed. The number of critical mass tracts stayed the same in ten of our 49 metro areas and increased in another 16. Among the 23 areas that saw a decline in these neighborhoods, the drops were greatest in Chicago, San Francisco, Houston, and Washington, D.C. Similarly, San Francisco, Washington, and Chicago also registered the largest declines in the number of sheltered homeless people residing in critical mass neighborhoods.

By contrast, Los Angeles-Long Beach stands out among the 18 areas that experienced an increase in sheltered homeless persons living in critical mass neighborhoods. Notably, the large increase it experienced (2,296 persons, or 56 percent) occurred despite a slight drop in the number of critical mass neighborhoods in the metro area.[20] This combination suggests a trend toward greater spatial concentration of the sheltered homeless, and represents the exception rather than the rule. The more typical pattern, exemplified by Atlanta, Cleveland, and Salt Lake City-Ogden, is that of concomitant gains in critical mass tracts and in sheltered homeless people within those tracts, although the changes are often modest in absolute terms.

Like Los Angeles, the New York metropolitan area also exhibited a hybrid pattern, but the trends were reversed. New York saw critical mass neighborhoods increase by about one-eighth, but saw the sheltered homeless population in those neighborhoods fall off slightly. This pattern corresponds to a shift in New York City shelter policy that began in the late 1980s. Faced with mounting resistance from neighborhoods saturated by shelters, municipal officials worked with the boroughs to reduce the size of shelters and dis-

Table 1. Top Ten Metropolitan Areas by Sheltered Homeless Population in Critical Mass Neighborhoods, 2000 and 1990–2000 Change

	2000		1990–2000 Change	
Metropolitan Area	Sheltered Homeless Population	Critical Mass Neighborhoods	Sheltered Homeless Population	Critical Mass Neighborhoods
New York, NY PMSA	23,111	81	(251)	9
Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA PMSA	6,394	16	2,296	(2)
Atlanta, GA MSA	2,052	10	460	4
Boston, MA-NH PMSA	2,048	9	(473)	(2)
Seattle-Bellevue-Everett, WA PMSA	2,026	9	(107)	1
Chicago, IL PMSA	1,679	8	(2,101)	(10)
San Diego, CA MSA	1,660	5	(1,210)	0
Washington, DC-MD-VA-WV PMSA	1,442	8	(2,993)	(5)
Detroit, MI PMSA	1,322	6	383	1
Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN-WI MSA	1,316	5	(169)	0
All 49 metro areas	**66,442**	**271**	**(12,901)**	**(26)**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

tribute them more widely.[21] In contrast to their growing spatial concentration in Los Angeles, then, the sheltered homeless in New York actually "thinned out" spatially during the 1990–2000 period.

B. Sheltered homeless people constitute a visible but rarely dominant group in critical mass neighborhoods.

The New York and Los Angeles-Long Beach examples imply that critical mass neighborhoods differ in the visibility of their sheltered homeless. Of course, census data cannot capture many aspects of visibility. For instance, shelter policies—particularly, how long homeless people are allowed to stay in shelters—contribute significantly to the street-level view. Other services offered to homeless clients within the neighborhood may also make their presence more apparent. To measure these factors, we would need information about the number and types of shelters present, details concerning the non-shelter service infrastructure (soup kitchens, drop-in centers), and the ways in which homeless people use public space in the neighborhood. None of these, unfortunately, are available from the SBE data.

Still, the census figures do permit us to measure three simple dimensions of visibility: the absolute size of a neighborhood's shelter population; the density of the sheltered homeless population within that neighborhood (per square mile); and the percentage of total neighborhood population that the sheltered homeless represent.

Results from our metro area sample indicate that while the sheltered homeless are typically present in noticeable numbers in critical mass neighborhoods, they account for a relatively small share of neighborhood population. Across all 271 critical mass neighborhoods in the 49 metro areas in 2000, the sheltered homeless average 245 in number, and make up just over 10 percent of the tract population. The small size of the central city census tracts in which shelters are typically located results in a relatively high average density for the sheltered homeless in critical mass neighborhoods, roughly 1,573 persons per square mile.

However, these overall numbers obscure significant variation from one metro area to the next.

Even within the same metropolitan area, neighborhood shelter populations vary markedly in terms of visibility. Table 2 presents the high and low values on each dimension of visibility for the metro areas in our sample with at least eight critical mass homeless neighborhoods. The gap between highest and lowest is especially notable in Los Angeles-Long Beach and New York. Both have neighborhoods with sheltered homeless populations of 1,000 or more and densities above 10,000 sheltered homeless per square mile. Such neighborhoods presumably contain multiple shelters, including some of substantial size. At the same time, each contains at least one critical mass neighborhood where the sheltered homeless account for only a small fraction of the population.

In 2000, there were only three critical mass neighborhoods—two in New York and one in Los Angeles-Long Beach—in which sheltered homeless people make up a majority of the total neighborhood population. In fact, the same Los Angeles neighborhood registers the highest values on all three visibility dimensions. These neighborhoods, of course, are outliers. More commonly, critical mass tracts are marked by a noticeable but much more moderate homeless presence. As other research confirms, few contemporary neighborhoods approach the high-profile characteristics of traditional skid rows.[22]

C. The vast majority (86 percent) of critical mass neighborhoods in large metro areas are located within central cities, but their locations have changed over the past decade

Evidence that the number of critical mass neighborhoods, and the sheltered homeless population living within them, declined during the 1990s suggests that shelters may have downsized or dispersed within metro areas. Even so, 86 percent of the critical mass homeless neighborhoods in our metro area sample in 2000 are located inside central cities. Here, we analyze whether the 1990s led the homeless population to disperse within central cities, or whether sheltered homeless people still live largely in critical mass neighborhoods.

We find that critical mass neighborhoods encompass a large share of their cities' sheltered homeless population.[23] Nearly three-fourths (73 percent) of all central city shelter inhabitants, including persons in census tracts not reaching the 100-sheltered-homeless threshold, reside in critical mass neighborhoods. Cities such as San Diego (99 percent), Sacramento (93 percent), Denver (88 percent), Orlando (86 percent), and New York (85 percent) have even higher proportions of their total sheltered homeless population in critical mass neighborhoods. By contrast, some cities like Baltimore (26 percent), Oakland (27 percent), and New Orleans (33 percent) exhibit much more dispersed sheltered populations, suggesting that a greater number of smaller shelters are scattered across more census tracts.[24]

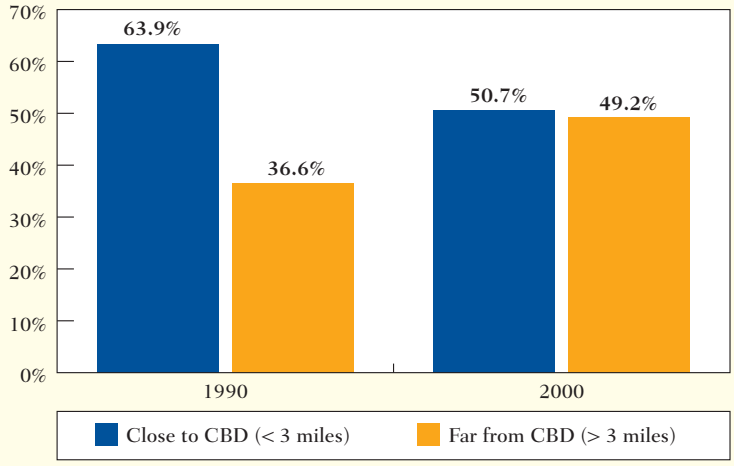
Table 2. Visibility Measures for Sheltered Homeless Population in Critical Mass Neighborhoods, Selected Metropolitan Areas, 2000

		Neighborhood Sheltered Homeless	
Metropolitan Area	Population	Population per square mile	Population share
New York, NY PMSA			
Average	285	3,750	11.3
High	1,264	18,057	97.3
Low	102	11	0.6
Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA PMSA			
Average	400	1,285	9.3
High	2,529	10,538	50.6
Low	102	78	1.5
Atlanta, GA MSA			
Average	205	250	4.7
High	506	888	16.1
Low	101	27	1.7
Boston, MA-NH PMSA			
Average	228	758	12.6
High	386	1,627	58.9
Low	109	94	1.4
Seattle-Bellevue-Everett, WA PMSA			
Average	225	552	8.1
High	391	1,006	17.2
Low	107	22	1.9
Chicago, IL PMSA			
Average	210	1,282	14.4
High	411	2,308	38.2
Low	107	210	2.5
Washington, DC-MD-VA-WV PMSA			
Average	180	884	6.5
High	470	2,338	25.3
Low	111	43	1.7
Philadelphia, PA-NJ PMSA			
Average	132	748	7.0
High	184	1,121	15.2
Low	103	568	1.4
All 49 metro areas (average)	**245**	**1,573**	**10.0**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Mapping the location of critical mass neighborhoods in 2000 highlights the variety of ways in which shelters are spatially configured. Although no two metropolitan areas are identical, we detect certain tendencies. The first tendency, the traditional "skid row" configuration, is

Figure 1. Location of Critical Mass Neighborhoods by Proximity to CBD, 1990–2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau and authors' calculations

exemplified by Seattle (Appendix Figure A), where critical mass neighborhoods are geographically contiguous and near the downtown. Phoenix-Mesa, San Diego, and San Francisco share a similar pattern, though each exhibits a few additional outlying pockets of sheltered homelessness.[25] As in Seattle, critical mass homeless tracts in Chicago (Appendix Figure B) are found mainly within the central city. However, in Chicago they form a checkerboard distribution to the north, west, and south of the downtown Loop.[26] This checkerboard pattern is also common to the Cleveland-Lorain-Elyria, Detroit, and Houston metro areas. Finally, Atlanta (Appendix Figure C) offers a sharp contrast to the Seattle and Chicago cases. Despite some clustering in the core, the majority of Atlanta's critical mass neighborhoods occupy outlying positions in the suburban ring. Fort Lauderdale, another Sunbelt metro area, shows a similar pattern of suburbanizing critical mass tracts.

Of course, many metro areas have too few critical mass neighborhoods to justify a search for patterns. Others constitute mixed cases, combining elements of two or more of the ideal types—clustering and checkerboard tendencies appear in Philadelphia, and Boston exhibits both of those tendencies plus a degree of suburbanization. The actual distribution of critical mass homeless neighborhoods in 2000 is simply too messy to distill into a few spatial generalizations applicable to most metropolitan areas.

One generalization that does hold pertains to locational change: critical mass neighborhoods have become somewhat more decentralized since 1990. We document this change by measuring the distance of each critical mass neighborhood from the central business district (CBD) of its respective central city.[27] In 1990, critical mass neighborhoods were located an average of 4.3 miles from the CBD; by 2000, the average distance had risen to 5.4 miles. Figure 1 shows a sizeable increase in the percentage of neighborhoods located three miles or farther from the CBD.[28]

Given the preponderance of critical mass homeless neighborhoods inside central city boundaries at both time points, decentralization appears to have occurred intra-city rather than on a metro-wide basis. But the 1990–2000 changes involve more than increasing distance from the CBD; the landscape of sheltered homelessness is in a general state of flux. The majority of critical mass neighborhoods in our sample achieved that status in one of the census years, but not both. Our sample of 49 metro areas contains 456 unique tracts that had a critical mass population in either 1990 or 2000 (Table 3). Out of this total, 185 (or 41 percent) satisfied the critical mass criterion in 1990 only; another 159 (35 percent) in 2000 only. Stable critical mass tracts, which meet or exceed the 100+ sheltered homeless threshold in both years, are by far the smallest category (112 tracts, or 25 percent).[29] In short, only one-fourth of neighborhoods identified as critical mass in 1990 or 2000 held that designation at both points in time.

With very few exceptions, stable critical mass tracts make up a minority of the critical mass homeless neighborhoods in our sample of metropolitan areas (see Appendix B for details on all 49 areas). Indeed, many of the metro areas exhibit minimal stability (i.e., under 30 percent), underscoring the spatially unsettled nature of sheltered homeless populations at the local level.

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate this point for the New York and Los Angeles-Long Beach metropolitan areas, displaying the location of critical mass neighborhoods in 1990 and 2000. In both areas, a majority of neighborhoods qualify as critical mass in either 1990 or 2000, but not in both years. In New York City's midtown and downtown neighborhoods, new critical mass homeless neighborhoods emerged in the 1990s, though not in nearly the same number as existed there at the beginning of the decade. In Los Angeles, some new critical mass neighbor-

hoods formed adjacent to neighborhoods that previously held significant sheltered populations, close to the CBD, while others appeared farther out.

The instability of critical mass neighborhoods in these cities may reflect minor, temporary fluctuations in some tracts, with sheltered homeless populations barely exceeding the 100-person threshold in one census year, and dipping just below it the next (or vice-versa). However, the very nature of local shelter systems is volatile: new shelters open rather frequently while others close, relocate, or downsize in response to shifting needs, resources, and policy. As these changes accumulate over the course of a decade, they may significantly modify the spatial distribution of sheltered homelessness.

D. Although the sheltered homeless account for only a small share of critical mass neighborhood populations, these neighborhoods tend to exhibit high levels of disadvantage generally.

As the sheltered homeless account for only 10 percent of the population in critical mass neighborhoods, on average, they can exert only so much direct influence on the overall characteristics of those neighborhoods. Yet these neighborhoods appear to exhibit qualities one might generally associate with homeless populations themselves, indicating that extant community characteristics continue to play a large role in the siting of shelters. In Table 4, we compare the 271 critical mass tracts in our metro area sample to adjacent census tracts, to the central city as a whole, and to the entire metro area along three dimensions: demographic composition, economic and social disadvantage, and housing.

The top panel of the table indicates that critical mass homeless neighborhoods tend to be heavily male and heavily minority in composition relative to the other three comparison

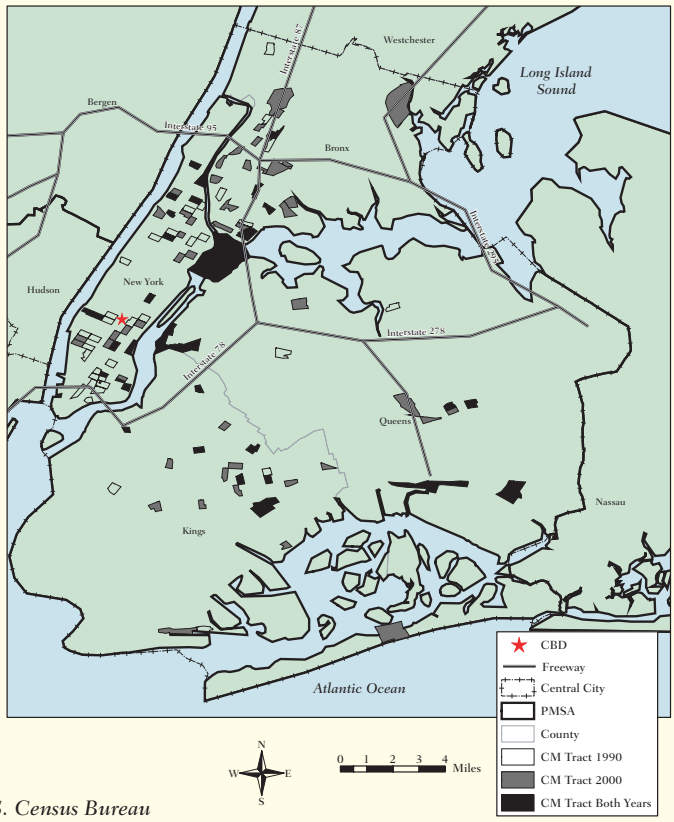
Table 3. Stability of Critical Mass Neighborhoods, Top Ten Metropolitan Areas, 1990–2000

	Critical Mass Neighborhoods			
Metropolitan Area	1990 only	2000 only	1990 and 2000	% Stable*
New York, NY PMSA	40	49	32	26.4
Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA PMSA	13	11	5	17.2
Atlanta, GA MSA	3	7	3	23.1
Boston, MA-NH PMSA	6	4	5	33.3
Seattle-Bellevue-Everett, WA PMSA	5	6	3	21.4
Chicago, IL PMSA	13	3	5	23.8
San Diego, CA MSA	3	3	2	25.0
Washington, DC-MD-VA-WV PMSA	9	4	4	23.5
Detroit, MI PMSA	3	4	2	22.2
Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN-WI MSA	1	1	4	66.7
All 49 metro areas	**185**	**159**	**112**	**24.6**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

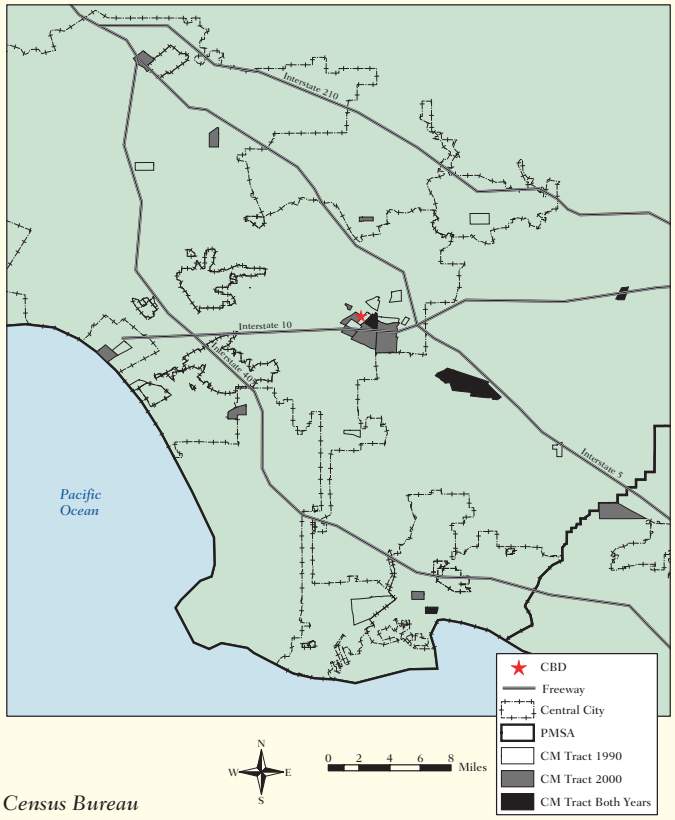
** Percentage of neighborhoods identified as critical mass in either 1990 or 2000 meeting criteria at both times*

Figure 2. Critical Mass Neighborhoods in New York Metropolitan Area, 1990 and 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 3. Critical Mass Neighborhoods in Los Angeles - Long Beach Metropolitan Area, 1990 and 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

units. The first feature is consistent with traditional skid row districts, the second with the profile of the new (post-1980) homelessness. Also notable is the dearth of married-couple households in these communities—one-person, single-parent, and non-family households are more common in critical mass neighborhoods than elsewhere. Finally, fewer adults in critical mass tracts hold a high school diploma.

The demographic character of these neighborhoods implies that they suffer from multiple forms of disadvantage. The second panel of Table 4 shows that average unemployment and poverty rates in 2000 are two to four times greater in critical mass homeless neighborhoods than in the surrounding central city or metropolitan area, respectively. These rates also far exceed those in adjacent neighborhoods. Residents of critical mass neighborhoods are more physically isolated than their counterparts, as nearly half lack access to a car, compared to one-tenth of all metropolitan dwellers. Moreover, approximately three in ten people in critical mass neighborhoods have a physical, mental, or emotional disability that restricts their routine functioning. When the characteristics of residents are considered as a whole, it becomes apparent that sheltered homelessness remains concentrated in the types of areas least able to defend themselves from land uses deemed undesirable by the general public.

The average critical mass homeless neighborhood also possesses a distinctive housing profile. One-half of the housing units in critical mass neighborhoods are located in buildings with ten or more units—suggesting zoning conducive to shelters—and those units are often quite small (29 percent consist of one or two rooms). Rental units predominate, comprising three-fourths of the housing stock. The vacancy rate in critical mass neighborhoods is somewhat higher than elsewhere, but much higher rates of overcrowding prevail. Twice the proportion of critical mass units satisfies the standard definition of crowding (1.01 or more persons per room) compared to all metropolitan housing units. In line with the generally compressed nature of the built environment, mean population density in critical mass neighborhoods (25,821 persons per square mile) dwarfs the metropolitan average (1,055). These average characteristics reflect not just the influence of large metro areas like New York and Los Angeles, but persist across most of the metro areas in our sample.[30]

The profile of suburban critical mass homeless neighborhoods is somewhat less distinctive. Only a handful of suburban critical mass neighborhoods exist in our metro area sample (38 out of 271), and while they exhibit higher levels of disadvantage than their metropolitan areas overall, they do differ systematically from critical mass tracts in central cities. They tend to contain smaller proportions of minority residents, and more married couples and high school graduates. They also fare better than their central city counterparts on indicators of unemployment, poverty, and the quality of the housing stock.

Stable critical mass neighborhoods, which met the threshold level for sheltered homelessness in both 1990 and 2000, reveal even more disadvantage than critical mass neighborhoods generally. In Table 5, we compare selected characteristics of the stable tracts to those of tracts qualifying as critical mass in just one of the census years. The stable neighborhoods have a higher average percentage of minority residents, relatively fewer married cou-

Table 4. Characteristics of Metropolitan Critical Mass Neighborhoods and Comparison Geographies, 2000

Characteristic	Critical Mass Neighborhoods	Adjacent Neighborhoods	Central Cities	Metropolitan Areas
Sex ratio (men per 100 women)	127.1	114.5	96.1	96.4
% Non-white or Hispanic	71.8	66.1	52.1	36.2
% Married-couple households	26.9	32.5	38.2	50.6
% High school graduates*	63.5	67.7	76.8	81.7
% Unemployed**	21.2	11.5	7.5	5.0
% Below Poverty	34.0	25.1	17.6	11.0
% Households w/o vehicle	45.8	36.4	17.4	10.1
% Disabled***	28.9	24.7	21.4	18.4
% In multi-unit structures	51.4	37.6	24.0	17.3
% Renter-occupied units	75.2	65.2	50.7	36.6
% Vacant units	10.5	8.6	7.6	6.3
% Crowded units****	16.6	15.5	9.4	7.0

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

* *Of persons 25+ years old*

** *Of civilian labor force 16+ years old*

*** *Physical, mental, or emotional disability that limits functional activities*

**** *1.01+ persons per room*

Table 5. Changes in Mean Characteristics of Types of Metropolitan Critical Mass Neighborhoods, 1990–2000

	Critical Mass Neighborhoods		
Characteristic	1990 only (185)	2000 only (159)	1990 and 2000 (112)
% Minority			
1990	57.0	62.6	70.4
2000	60.5	70.9	73.1
% Married-couple households			
1990	29.7	32.4	24.5
2000	26.6	29.9	22.6
% Poor			
1990	30.6	29.7	42.2
2000	28.0	31.3	37.8
% In multi-unit structures			
1990	49.6	48.6	53.9
2000	50.0	48.6	55.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

ples, more poor people, and a larger share of housing units in multi-unit structures in both census years than the 1990-only and 2000-only neighborhoods. And, with the exception of the poverty rate, these characteristics moved farther away from metropolitan norms over the course of the decade.

Conclusion

At the national level, few neighborhoods have truly substantial sheltered homeless populations. Of the more than 65,000 census tracts in Census 2000, fewer than 400 meet the critical mass threshold. The majority of these are located in large metropolitan areas, with New York claiming a disproportionate share. Moreover, the overwhelming proportion of these metropolitan critical mass homeless neighborhoods fall inside central city limits, and contain a majority of all homeless shelter inhabitants metrowide. Comparing 1990 and 2000 census data shows that the number of critical mass neighborhoods declined in many metropolitan areas. While the reasons for this decline are uncertain, it probably does not owe to any shrinkage in the overall size of the homeless population.

The decline is, however, consistent with a gradual dispersion of the sheltered homeless population. Our analysis reveals a variety of spatial configurations across metropolitan settings, ranging from the relatively concentrated pattern evident in Seattle to the more suburbanized shelter population of Atlanta. Nevertheless, two findings stand out regarding the geography of metropolitan homelessness. First, critical mass neighborhoods are more decentralized in 2000 than they were a decade earlier. Second, little overlap exists between the neighborhoods qualifying as critical mass at both points in time. Shelter downsizing, closure, and relocation, as well as the

opening of smaller facilities for specialized groups, appear to have spread sheltered homelessness to different locations throughout the metropolis.

This shift away from traditional skid rows means that more neighborhoods now have experience with shelters. How are they affected? With respect to visibility, the impact may not be large. Our results indicate that homeless people staying in emergency and transitional shelters constitute only about one-tenth of the total population in the average critical mass neighborhood. Of course, many shelters are not big enough to push the host neighborhood beyond the 100-person critical mass threshold. Such shelters may have physical designs more compatible with their surroundings, and house clienteles such as women and children, as opposed to single men. Shelter operating procedures (including daily schedule and amount of supervision provided), effects on congestion (traffic, parking, noise), and the types of human service-oriented facilities already present in a neighborhood are among the other factors that could influence shelter visibility and hence how domiciled residents respond.[31] Unfortunately, census sources offer no details on the number of shelters let alone their characteristics.

As neighborhood residents encounter the sheltered homeless, their reactions are not necessarily negative. Indeed, exposure to homelessness, including the presence of homeless people in one's neighborhood, can make an individual's attitudes toward homelessness more favorable or sympathetic, at least in the abstract.[32] But those attitudes can change quickly when residents perceive their own place-based interests--, such as property values and safety, to be at stake. NIMBY-ism is often prompted by concerns over the stigma associated with homeless shelters and occupants; residents do not want that stigma to "rub off" on them.[33] As our research implies, certain neighborhoods are less able than others to mount campaigns against the placement of shelters. Disadvantaged areas of the central city tend to be particularly vulnerable to shelter overload.

This final finding highlights the equity issues and policy choices facing local governments. Localities have invoked "fair share" principles with increasing frequency to balance the burden of human service facilities across neighborhoods.[34] Encouraging greater dispersion of the sheltered homeless may also increase the accessibility of shelters and essential services to poor people living in outlying parts of the metropolis. As permanent housing programs replace emergency and transitional shelters as the primary strategy for addressing chronic homelessness, efforts to achieve greater dispersal may ease. A nascent trend in this direction is already apparent.[35]

Meanwhile, other contemporary factors suggest that we keep a close eye on the trends explored in this survey. For example, will local social service reforms and urban redevelopment efforts alter the number or location of critical mass neighborhoods? What implications might current economic woes, an affordable housing squeeze, and federal policies pertaining to homelessness and housing vouchers have for the geography of urban homelessness? We suggest that future research give greater attention to these questions as they affect the geographic and demographic setting for sheltered homelessness in the nation's large metropolitan areas.

Appendix Table 1: Sheltered Homeless Population in Critical Mass Neighborhoods by Metropolitan Area, 2000 and 1990–2000 Change

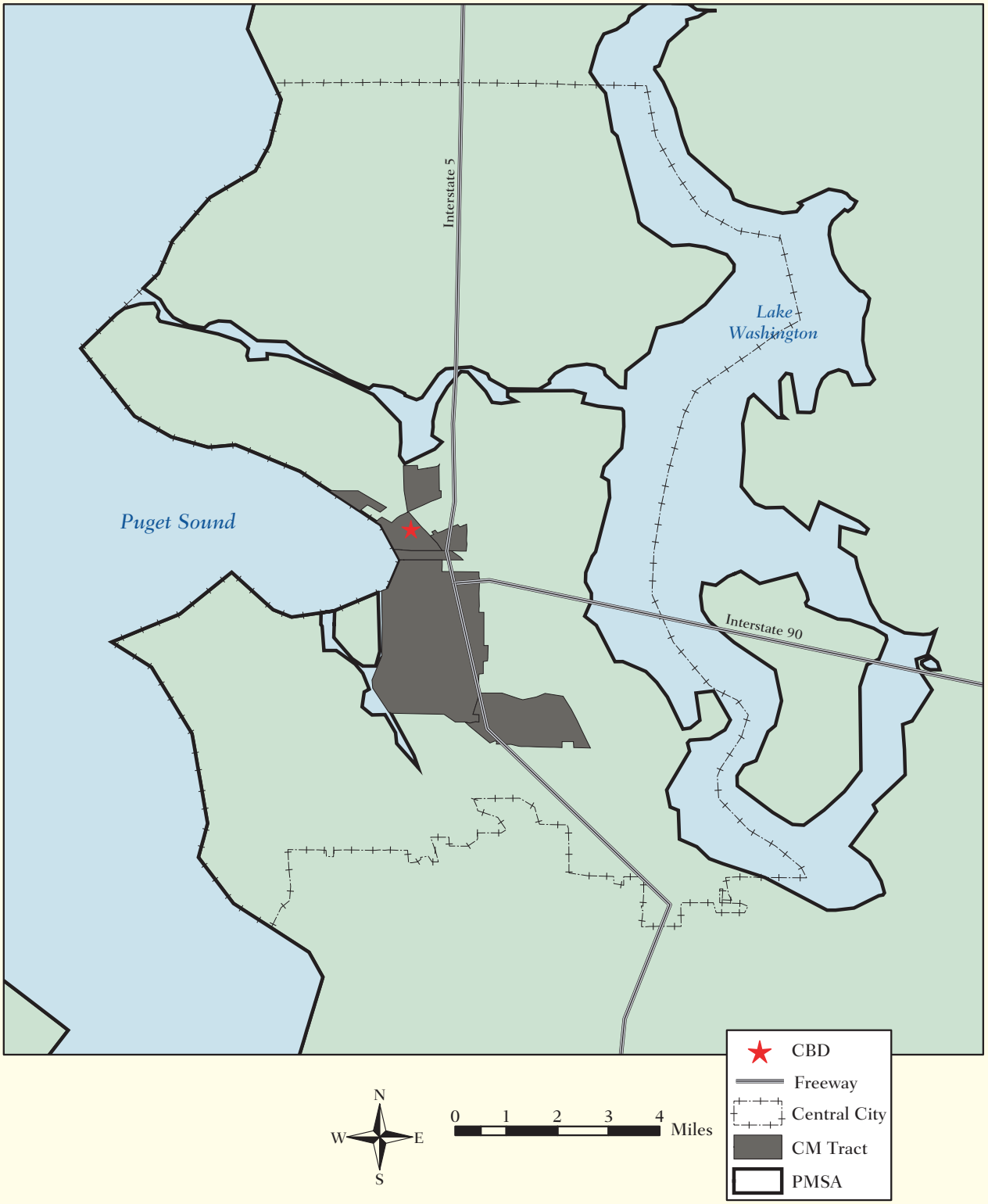
Metropolitan Area	2000 Sheltered Homeless Population	2000 Critical Mass Neighborhoods	1990–2000 Change Sheltered Homeless Population	1990–2000 Change Critical Mass Neighborhoods
New York, NY PMSA	23,111	81	-251	9
Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA PMSA	6,394	16	2,296	-2
Atlanta, GA MSA	2,052	10	460	4
Boston, MA-NH PMSA	2,048	9	-473	-2
Seattle-Bellevue-Everett, WA PMSA	2,026	9	-107	1
Chicago, IL PMSA	1,679	8	-2,101	-10
San Diego, CA MSA	1,660	5	-1,210	0
Washington, DC-MD-VA-WV PMSA	1,442	8	-2,993	-5
Detroit, MI PMSA	1,322	6	383	1
Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN-WI MSA	1,316	5	-169	0
Philadelphia, PA-NJ PMSA	1,315	10	-1,369	-3
Las Vegas, NV-AZ MSA	1,293	3	741	1
Denver, CO PMSA	1,217	3	-47	-1
San Francisco, CA PMSA	1,125	5	-3,416	-9
Dallas, TX PMSA	1,037	3	-42	-1
Portland-Vancouver, OR-WA PMSA	983	3	-355	-1
Cleveland-Lorain-Elyria, OH PMSA	957	6	729	5
Miami, FL PMSA	951	4	195	2
Phoenix-Mesa, AZ MSA	926	5	-862	0
Salt Lake City-Ogden, UT MSA	896	5	475	3
Houston, TX PMSA	763	4	-597	-5
Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, NC MSA	746	4	423	2
Louisville, KY-IN MSA	734	4	126	0
Orange Co., CA PMSA	725	4	187	0
Fort Lauderdale, FL PMSA	702	5	372	3
Fresno, CA MSA	683	4	119	1
San Jose, CA PMSA	577	4	-432	-1
Cincinnati, OH-KY-IN PMSA	531	2	-346	-1
Newark, NJ PMSA	500	4	-1,506	-3
Orlando, FL MSA	500	2	-35	-1
Sacramento, CA PMSA	486	1	-341	-2
Charlotte-Gastonia-Rock Hill, NC-SC MSA	450	2	-28	0
Columbus, OH MSA	404	2	60	0
Oakland, CA PMSA	403	2	-721	-3
San Antonio, TX MSA	380	2	-213	-1

Appendix Table 1 continued

Metropolitan Area	2000 Sheltered Homeless Population	2000 Critical Mass Neighborhoods	1990–2000 Change Sheltered Homeless Population	1990–2000 Change Critical Mass Neighborhoods
Fort Worth-Arlington, TX PMSA	379	1	-419	-2
Nashville, TN MSA	377	1	-206	-1
Kansas City, MO-KS MSA	366	2	214	1
Greensboro-Winston-Salem-High Point, NC MSA	325	1	-37	-1
Bergen-Passaic, NJ PMSA	296	2	-105	0
Riverside-San Bernardino, CA PMSA	294	2	-334	0
Nassau-Suffolk, NY PMSA	292	1	292	1
Austin-San Marcos, TX MSA	289	1	-52	0
Baltimore, MD PMSA	285	2	-433	-2
Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, FL MSA	281	1	-726	-4
Indianapolis, IN MSA	279	2	95	1
Milwaukee-Waukesha, WI PMSA	230	2	119	1
New Orleans, LA MSA	212	1	-464	-3
Providence-Fall River-Warwick, RI-MA MSA	203	2	203	2
Total	**66,442**	**271**	**-12,901**	**-26**

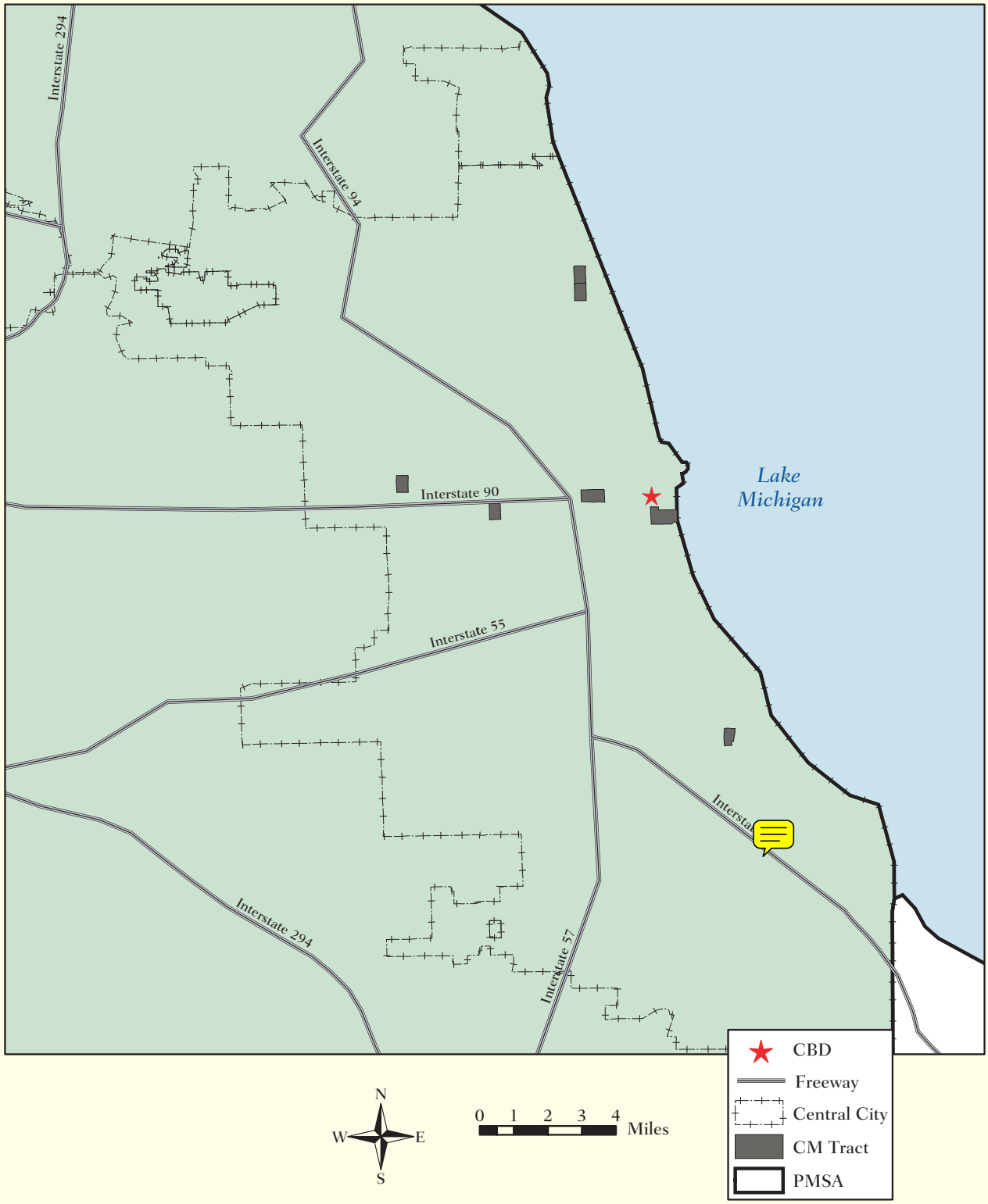
Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Appendix Figure A. Critical Mass Neighborhoods in City of Seattle, 2000



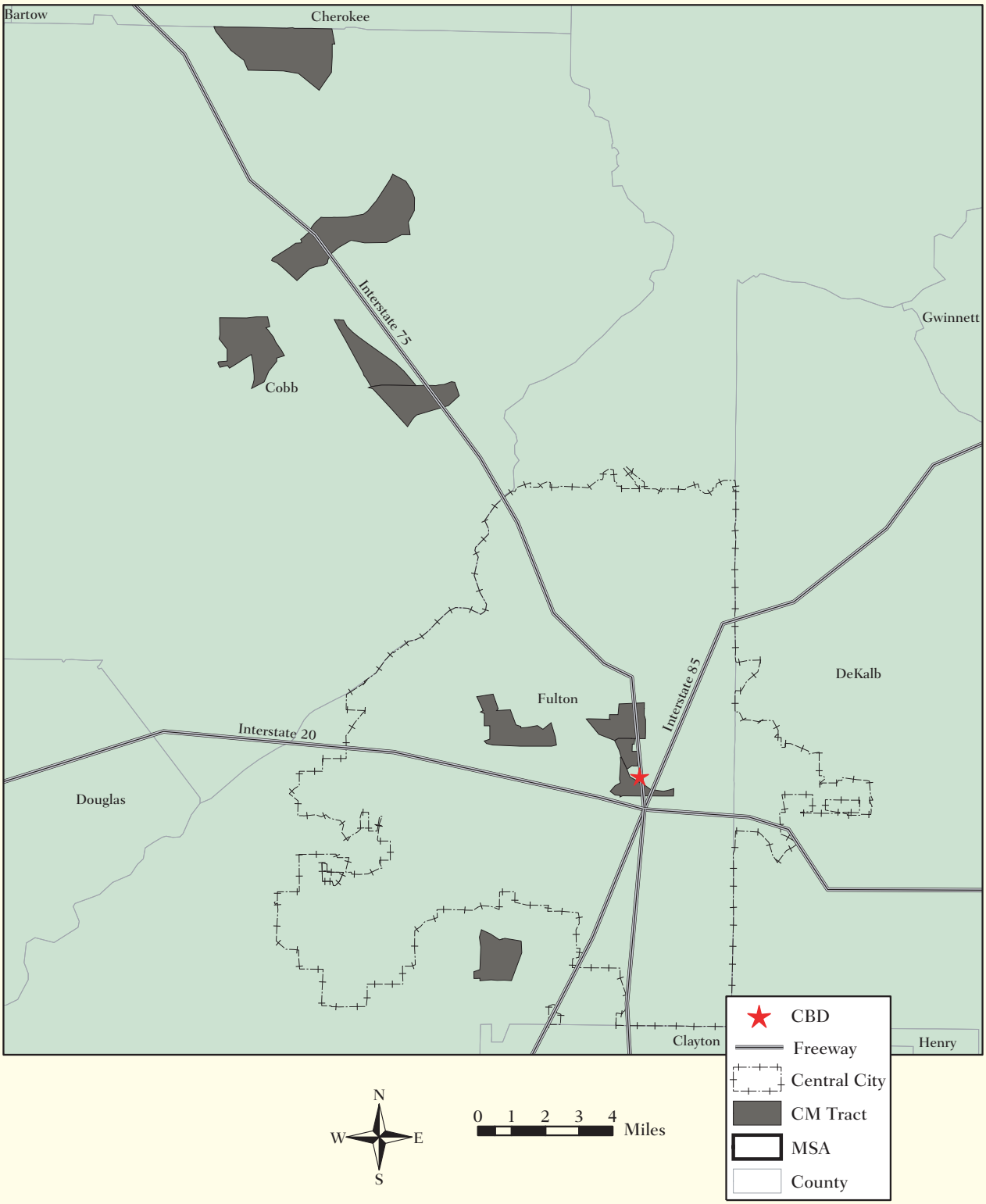
Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Appendix Figure B. Critical Mass Neighborhoods in City of Chicago, 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Appendix Figure C. Critical Mass Neighborhoods in Atlanta Metropolitan Area, 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Endnotes

1. The rise of the "new" (post-1980) homelessness—as distinct from the skid row era that preceded it—has been attributed to a housing squeeze (persistent poverty coupled with a decrease in affordable housing units), deteriorating employment opportunities, deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, a shrinking welfare safety net, the crack cocaine epidemic, and a decline in the attractiveness of marriage, among other forces (Baumohl, 1996; Jencks, 1994; Lee, Price-Spratlen, and Kanan, 2003; Wright, Rubin, and Devine, 1998).

2. Brinegar, 2003; Hoch, 1991; Gaber, 1996; Laws, 1992.

3. National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 1996; Simon, 1996; Snow and Mulcahy, 2001.

4. Dear, 1992; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 1997; Takahashi and Dear, 1997; Wolch and Dear, 1993.

5. Recent evidence suggests that roughly one-half of homeless shelters serve 25 persons or fewer per day (Burt, Aron, and Lee, 2001; Feins and Fosburg, 1999).

6. Because census data are not the best way to determine how many are homeless, researchers have tried to tally the homeless population through other means, though the results are still approximations. Using data from a 1996 survey, for example, investigators at the Urban Institute projected that over the course of that year there were at least 2.3 and perhaps as many as 3.5 million people who experienced a spell of homelessness at some time (Burt, Aron, and Lee, 2001). While the composition of the homeless population remains uncertain, evidence suggests that it has become progressively more heterogeneous, with an increase in the number of minorities, families with children, single women, and unaccompanied minors (Baumohl, 1996; Lowe and others, 2001; Wright, Rubin, and Devine, 1998).

7. For period prevalence estimates, see Culhane and others, 1994; Link and others, 1995; Metraux and others, 2001.

8. Smith and Smith, 2001.

9. Taeuber and Siegel, 1991.

10. Smith and Smith, 2001; also see U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003.

11. Burt, Aron, and Lee, 2001.

12. Martin, 1992.

13. Census tracts are small geographic areas with between 1,500 and 8,000 residents, and an optimum size of 4,000. The Census Bureau seeks local input in defining tract boundaries, which they design to remain stable over an extended period. Within metropolitan areas, boundaries frequently follow streets, highways, railroad tracks, rivers, and other visible features of the landscape.

14. According to available estimates, over nine-tenths of all homeless live in metropolitan areas, with roughly three-fourths in central cities (Burt, Aron, and Lee, 2001; Lee and Price-Spratlen, 2004).

15. The three excluded metropolitan areas among the 50 largest are Norfolk-Virginia Beach-Newport News, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis, none of which contained a single critical mass neighborhood in 2000. We include Louisville and Fresno because they are the only other metro areas among the 100 largest that have at least four critical mass neighborhoods, and 500 or more sheltered homeless in these neighborhoods

16. However, these tracts are not a common feature of the metropolitan scene. Barely 1 percent of all tracts located in the sample metro areas satisfy the critical mass criterion; among central cities in the sample, the corresponding figure is 2.1 percent.

17. We impose Census 2000 boundaries on metro areas, central cities, and tracts in 1990, insuring that any changes observed are not due to a shift in the way that geographic areas are defined.

18. As one of the largest metro areas, New York is likely to have more homeless people. At the same time, the city is also among the few places nationally to have a "right to shelter" decree, prompted by a series of class-action lawsuits in the early 1980s, that guarantees shelter for all homeless individuals who seek it (Gaber, 1996). The decree requires that an adequate number of shelters be made available to accommodate those in need. The greater number of critical mass neighborhoods in New York can be traced in part to this decree.

19. Between 1988 and 1996, an expanding emergency shelter capacity at the national level accompanied the addition of nearly 275,000 permanent and transitional housing units intended for homeless persons (Burt, Aron, and Lee, 2001).

20. As was the case in New York, past policy decisions regarding the homeless helped to shape the current shelter landscape in Los Angeles. During the 1970s, the Community Redevelopment Agency's "policy of containment" sought to centralize homeless facilities and services in the Central City East area (including the traditional skid row district) proximate to the needy population. As a result, the largely single-room occupancy housing stock in the area has stabilized, and delivery of services has expanded, including an increase in the number of shelter beds (Spivak 1998; also see Wolch and Dear, 1993).

21. Gaber, 1996.

22. Lee, 1980; Lee and Price-Spratlen, 2004; Wolch and Dear; 1993.

23. To demonstrate this point, we focus on the 35 metropolitan areas in the sample for which the number of sheltered homeless is reported for each component central city. Recall that data in 2000 are suppressed for any geographic unit-—cities as well as census tracts—with sheltered homeless populations under 100. The 11 metro areas

affected by such suppression and thus excluded here are Austin-San Marcos, Charlotte-Gastonia-Rock Hill, Cleveland-Lorain-Elyria, Greensboro-Winston Salem-High Point, Milwaukee-Waukesha, Orange County, Providence-Fall River-Warwick, Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, Riverside-San Bernardino, Salt Lake City-Ogden, and Seattle-Bellevue-Everett. In addition, Las Vegas has been excluded because of a data inconsistency problem, and Bergen-Passaic and Nassau-Suffolk are omitted due to their entirely suburban character, which precludes calculations involving central cities as units.

24. Although we adhere to Census Bureau precedent in defining central cities, some researchers have focused on primary cities instead, limiting their attention to the first city listed in the official (OMB) metropolitan area name plus any other city in the name with at least 100,000 residents. Application of the primary city rule—which excludes smaller central cities that fail to reach the critical mass threshold (e.g., dropping San Marcos from Austin and Bellevue and Everett from Seattle; see note 23)—boosts the number of cases from 35 to 44 for this part of the analysis. It does not, however, change the results. Under the new rule, the average proportion of primary city sheltered homeless located in critical mass neighborhoods equals 62.8 percent (versus 63 percent of central city homeless).

25. Further analysis of the spatial distribution of shelters in Phoenix-Mesa can be found in Brinegar, 2003. The geography of homelessness in San Francisco is examined in Lee and Price-Spratlen, 2004.

26. The emergence of the checkerboard pattern is documented by Hoch, 1991.

27. We have defined CBDs on a tract basis, using information from the 1982 Census of Retail Trade. (The CBD tract identification program was discontinued after 1982.) Distance is measured between the geographic centroid of the critical mass tract and the centroid of the tract or tracts that make up the CBD. In the case of multiple central cities with multiple CBDs, we use the distance to the nearest CBD.

28. To account for the possibility that the disproportionate number of critical mass tracts in New York may be driving these changes, we replicated the distance analysis for non-New York tracts. The basic patterns reported for the full sample hold when New York tracts are deleted: the average distance of critical mass neighborhoods from the CBD rose from 3.5 to five miles between 1990 and 2000, and the percentage of such neighborhoods three miles or farther from the CBD increased significantly as well. Additional tests show the results for the rest of our analysis to be similarly robust; that is, they are not unduly influenced by New York's sample dominance.

29. The sheltered homeless populations in stable critical mass neighborhoods average more than 300 members at both time points, compared to a 1990 average of 203 in the 1990-only neighborhoods and a 2000 average of 186 in the 2000-only neighborhoods. Mean homeless density exceeds 2,000 persons per square mile in the stable neighborhoods, nearly double the level in the other two types of neighborhoods. Finally, sheltered homeless persons constitute an average of 14–17 percent of all residents in stable critical mass neighborhoods, but 7–10 percent in the 1990-only and 2000-only neighborhoods.

30. We repeated the comparisons for the 25 metro areas in our sample with at least three critical mass neighborhoods and sheltered homeless populations of 700 or more in the year 2000. The critical mass tracts exhibit a higher sex ratio (on average) than does their respective metro area in 24 of the 25 cases, a lower proportion of married-couple households in 24, and a higher minority percentage and lower percentage of high school graduates in all 25. Similar consistency is apparent on the measures of disadvantage and housing conditions described in Table 4.

31. Dear, 1992; Takahashi and Dear, 1997; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 1997.

32. Henig, 1994; Lee, Farrell, and Link, 2004.

33. Takahashi, 1997.

34. Gaber, 1996; Takahashi and Dear, 1997.

35. Burt, Aron, and Lee, 2001.

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