

# **Do Homeless People Have Community Ties to the Cities and Counties in Which They Are Homeless?**

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This paper examined “geographical and relational community ties” that homeless persons have to the City of Pasadena and the County of Ventura based on questions that were asked during a recent survey administered to persons who were homeless within these jurisdictions. A geographical community tie was based on whether a survey respondent was born or first became homeless within the jurisdiction in which they were homeless. A geographical community tie was also based on whether a survey respondent considered the jurisdiction in which they were homeless to be their home or whether they considered themselves to be a resident of the jurisdiction. A relational community tie included having family or friends, having worked or currently working, or having attended school in the jurisdiction in which they were homeless.

Geographical and relational community ties were analyzed separately and combined together within each jurisdiction in order to establish a range of ties that homeless persons had to the jurisdiction in which they were homeless. Primary findings include:

## Ventura County

Nearly 100% (96%) of survey respondents in Ventura County acknowledged one or more geographical ties to Ventura County. Of these persons, 87% acknowledged two or more relational community ties and 67% acknowledged three or more community ties.

## City of Pasadena

More than three-fourths (77%) of survey respondents in Pasadena acknowledged one or more geographical ties to Pasadena. Of these persons, 79% acknowledged two or more relational community ties and 66% acknowledged three or more community ties.

### **I. Purpose**

Although there are “new homeless persons,” old questions about the transience of homeless persons remain and often go unanswered when asked. The phrase “new homeless<sup>1</sup>” has come to refer to the increasing number of single women and women with children who have become homeless since the 1980s and which has been well

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth L. Kusmer, *Down and Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); pp. 239-247. Also see “Homeless in America,” in the January 2, 1984 issue of Newsweek which contains a series of articles about the changing demographics of homelessness.

documented.<sup>2</sup> The phrase “new homeless” also refers to two-parent families with children and single male-headed households.<sup>3</sup> It has become increasingly difficult to label new homeless persons as “tramps” and “hobos” which were a couple common terms to describe homeless persons travelling from town to town since the Civil War. However, there is still a tendency to describe homeless persons as “transients” and this has become another common term. For example, single women have been referred to as “bag ladies” which implies that they have all their possessions readily at hand, and parents with children as “beggars” which implies that they need a little money for the family to eat and/or for gasoline so they can get on their way.

The perception of homeless persons being transient often surfaces in the midst of NIMBY opposition. NIMBY (not in my back yard) has been a major obstacle to locating services for homeless persons. Case studies involving NIMBY opposition have documented that the large majority of people opposing the location of homeless services agree that such services are needed but oppose the establishment of such services in their communities.

I have been part of many community meetings in which participants have expressed NIMBY opposition during the past couple of decades. Such gatherings have included neighborhood associations, business associations, and city council meetings. I attended, or was asked to attend, such meetings because of my experiences in designing and implementing homeless service programs. I heard participants ask if homeless persons living in their community were “residents” of their neighborhood or city. I was often asked to give an answer because of my experience.

I do not remember anyone specifically defining residency; however, I do remember people asking if homeless persons worked, went to school, or had family in their community. Often I felt the implication was that homeless persons were transient. People expected to hear that homeless people had no history of working, attending school, or having family in the community in which they were receiving homeless services and the same would be true if they allowed homeless services in their community.

The purpose of this paper is to present findings based on the answers given by homeless persons concerning whether or not they worked or were working, attended school, and had family and friends in the jurisdiction in which they were homeless. In addition, findings are also based on whether or not homeless persons felt that the

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<sup>2</sup> See Barry Jay Seltser and Donald E. Miller, *Homeless Families: The Struggle for Dignity*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) and Burt M. R., Aron, L.Y., and Lee. E., *Helping America's Homeless: Emergency Shelter or Affordable Housing*, (Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 2001); pp. 55-96; pp. 137-159.

<sup>3</sup> “Promising Strategies to End Family Homelessness,” prepared by the by the National Alliance to End Homelessness for Freddie Mac, July, 2006, pps. 3-6.

jurisdiction in which they were homeless was their place of residency and home. Such information is meant to help answer any questions or to gain perspective about transiency among today's homeless population.

## II. Background Information

Homelessness has assumed a variety of characteristics over time in the United States. One such characteristic is transiency. Ever since homelessness emerged in America the public has experienced homeless persons as mobile. During the colonial era they were referred to as "the wandering poor" and "vagrants." After the Civil War homeless persons were associated with tramping and were known as tramps, which generally meant someone who went "on the road" looking for work. Soon afterwards, as the number of railroads and rail lines increased, so did the number of tramps. A new term, the word "hobo," was also ascribed to them and referred to a person who would ride railroads without paying in search of work.<sup>4</sup>

Before long, the word transient was added to a growing list of words that described homeless persons as a result of charitable organizations establishing shelters. During the early 1900s agencies such as the Salvation Army transformed residential facilities into places for temporary shelter that provided beds, meals, clothes, showers, and other amenities. The persons who stayed at these places were referred to as temporary guests or transients who either came to the surrounding area looking for work or were passing through and headed to another area to seek work.<sup>5</sup>

Temporary shelters were concentrated into Skid Row areas of cities over time. Skid Rows were often found in the "downtown" or center of a city where trains and roads surrounded manufacturing, wholesaling, and retailing businesses. Transients came to these areas in search of work and stayed at the growing number of temporary shelters. Such shelters were also bounded by inexpensive housing such as small apartments and even smaller single-room occupancy units that had just one private room that served as a living and sleeping space with shared kitchen, dining, and bathroom areas.<sup>6</sup>

After World War II, skid rows became the symbol of homelessness to the public as the number of tramps and hobos became less visible on roads and rails and more visible in skid rows. If one of them travelled, it was often from one skid row area to another. Newspaper articles, magazine stories, and academic research largely depicted homeless persons as men who did not have community ties while living in skid rows. They lived away from family members and friends they once knew. They did not marry or raise children nor had they attended school. They did not vote, own property, and lived within the same skid row area for longer periods.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth L. Kusmer, *Down and Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193 – 220.

<sup>6</sup> Kim Hopper, *Reckoning with Homelessness*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003); pp. 25 – 53.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth L. Kusmer, *Down and Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History*; pp. 221- 237.

By the 1980s, however, the homeless population began to change significantly. An increasingly number of homeless families was visibly seen by the public walking on the streets, living in vehicles, and crowding into shelters. By 2009, families made up 37% of the nation's homeless population according to the latest report from the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness.<sup>8</sup> The report noted that

“On a single night in 2009, 238,110 people in families were counted as homeless. Most (79 percent) were sheltered in emergency shelters or transitional housing. Over the course of 2009, as many as 535,447 people in families were sheltered, an increase of 4 percent from the previous year and 13 percent since 2007.”<sup>9</sup>

The report also noted that “Families experiencing homelessness are usually headed by a single woman who on average is in her late 20s with approximately two children, one or both under six years of age.” Her school-age children were often in school. Public schools across the country reported over 956,000 homeless students for the 2008-09 school year.<sup>10</sup>

### III. Methodology

A homeless survey was administered to approximately one-fourth of the homeless population that was counted in the City of Pasadena and the County of Ventura during January of 2010. The survey, which was conducted during the months of February and March, was designed to collect a wide-range of information from homeless persons as well as to assess their service needs using questions that focused on several areas including: age, community ties, domestic violence, education, ethnicity, familial status, gender, geo-history, health status, income, length of time homeless, mental health, religious experiences, substance abuse history, and veteran status.<sup>11</sup>

The questions concerning indicators to geographic and relational community ties included the following:

#### City of Pasadena

##### Geographic Community Ties:

1. Are you a resident of Pasadena?
2. What city do you consider to be your home?
3. In what city did you *FIRST* become homeless?
4. In what city where you born?

#### County of Ventura

1. Are you a resident of Ventura County?
2. What city do you consider to be your home?
3. In what city did you *FIRST* become homeless?
4. In what city where you born?

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<sup>8</sup> United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, 2010, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Copies of these reports including questionnaires can be found on the following web site: [www.urban-initiatives.org](http://www.urban-initiatives.org).

### Relational Community Ties:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 5. Do you have family who live in Pasadena?   | 5. Do you have family who live in Ventura County?   |
| 6. Do you have friends who live in Pasadena?  | 6. Do you have friends who live in Ventura County?  |
| 7. Have you ever worked in Pasadena?          | 7. Have you ever worked in Ventura County?          |
| 8. Are you currently working in Pasadena?     | 8. Are you currently working in Ventura County?     |
| 9. Have you ever attended school in Pasadena? | 9. Have you ever attended school in Ventura County? |

The answers concerning the four questions about geographical community ties were first analyzed. If survey respondents stated that they were born and/or first became homeless in the jurisdiction in which they were homeless, then they were considered as having a geographical tie to the jurisdiction. For example, survey respondents were considered as having a geographical tie if they considered the jurisdiction in which they were homeless to be their home or whether they considered themselves to be a resident of the jurisdiction.

The answers to the five questions concerning relational community ties were examined next. Such ties were grouped as follows: 1) those who answered “yes” to three or more ties; 2) those who answered “yes” to two or more ties; 3) those who answered “yes” to one tie; and 4) those who did not answer “yes” to any of the questions.

## Findings

### Geographical Indicators

The four (4) questions listed in the table below represent geographical indicators concerning “community ties.”

Of the 230 survey respondents who completed the Pasadena survey, nearly two-thirds (62%) or 150 stated that they were a resident of Pasadena and more than half (54) or 124 considered Pasadena their home city. Less than half (47%) or 108 first became homeless in Pasadena and seven percent (7%) or 15 were born in Pasadena. Collectively, more than three-fourths (77%) or 178 of the 230 survey respondents identified themselves as a resident of Pasadena, considered Pasadena to be their home city, first became homeless in Pasadena, and/or stated they were born in Pasadena.

Table 1.

Question:	Pasadena	
	#	%
1. Are you a resident of Pasadena?	150	62
2. What city do you consider to be your home?	124	54
3. In what city did you <i>FIRST</i> become homeless?	108	47
4. In what city where you born?	15	7
Survey respondents who identified themselves as a resident of Pasadena, considered Pasadena to be their home city, first became homeless in Pasadena, and/or stated that that they were born in Pasadena.	178	77

	<b>Ventura County</b>	
	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
1. Are you a resident of Ventura County?	370	86
2. What city do you consider to be your home?	372	86
3. In what city did you <i>FIRST</i> become homeless?	326	76
4. In what city where you born?	36	8
Survey respondents who identified themselves as a resident of Ventura County, considered a city within Ventura County as their home city, first became homeless in a city in Ventura County, and/or were born in a city within Ventura County.	412	96%

Of the 431 survey respondents who completed the Ventura County survey, 86% or 370 stated that they were a resident of Ventura County. Eighty-six percent (86%) or 372 survey respondents considered a city within Ventura County as their home city. Of these persons, 149 stated that Ventura was their home city, 117 stated Oxnard, 43 stated Simi Valley, 26 stated Thousand Oaks, 14 stated Santa Paula, 13 stated Ojai, eight (8) stated Camarillo, one (1) stated Moorpark, one (1) stated Port Hueneme, and none (0) stated Fillmore.

More than three-fourths (76%) or 326 survey respondents stated that they first became homeless in a city in Ventura County. Of these persons, 125 stated Ventura, 112 stated Oxnard, 36 stated Simi Valley, 23 stated Thousand Oaks, 13 stated Santa Paula, 12 stated Ojai, three (3) stated Camarillo, two (2) stated Moorpark, and none (0) stated Fillmore.

Seventy-six (76) survey respondents or 8% stated that they were born in a city in Ventura County. Of these persons, 33 stated Ventura, 31 stated Oxnard, six (6) stated Thousand Oaks, three (3) stated Ojai, two (2) stated Santa Paula, and one (1) stated Simi Valley.

Collectively, nearly all survey respondents (96%) or 412 identified themselves as a resident of Ventura County, considered a city within Ventura County to be their home city, first became homeless in a city within Ventura County, and/or were born in a city within Ventura County.

### Relational Indicators

The five (5) questions listed in table 2 represent relational indicators concerning “community ties.”

Of the 230 survey respondents who completed the Pasadena survey, nearly two-thirds (62%) stated that they have friends who live in Pasadena and more than half (58%) were currently working or had worked in Pasadena. Less than half (40%) attended school in Pasadena and nearly one-third (32%) had family who live in Pasadena.

Table 2.

Question:	Pasadena	
	#	%
1. Do you have family who live in Pasadena?	74	32
2. Do you have friends who live in Pasadena?	142	62
3. Have you ever worked in Pasadena?	114	50
4. Are you currently working in Pasadena?	19	8
5. Have you ever attended school in Pasadena?	93	40
	Ventura County	
	#	%
1. Do you have family who live in Ventura County?	233	54
2. Do you have friends who live in Ventura County?	363	84
3. Have you ever worked in Ventura County?	353	82
4. Are you currently working in Ventura County?	78	18
5. Have you ever attended school in Ventura County?	222	51

Of the 431 survey respondents who completed the Ventura County survey, 84% stated that they have friends who live in Ventura County and nearly as many (82%) had worked in the county. More than half (54%) noted that they have family who live in Ventura County and more than half (51%) had attended school in the county. Eighteen percent (18%) were currently working in the county.

### Combining Geographical and Relational Indicators

Tables 3 and 4 combines the geographical and relational indicators by noting a range of community ties concerning survey respondents for both jurisdictions.

Of the 178 survey respondents who identified themselves as a resident of Pasadena, considered Pasadena to be their home city, first became homeless in Pasadena, and/or stated that that they were born in Pasadena, nearly two-thirds (66%) stated that they have three or more community ties to Pasadena. More than three-fourths (79%) stated that they have two or more community ties and 16% noted only one community tie. Five percent (5%) noted no community ties.

Table 3.

<b>Finding:</b>	<b>Pasadena</b>	
	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
Survey respondents who identified themselves as a resident of Pasadena, considered Pasadena to be their home city, first became homeless in Pasadena, and/or stated that that they were born in Pasadena.	178	77
<b>Community Ties:</b>		
Three community ties or more	118	66
Two community ties	22	13
One community tie	29	16
No community ties	9	5

Of the 412 survey respondents who identified themselves as a resident of Ventura County, considered a city within Ventura County as their home city, first became homeless in a city in Ventura County, and/or were born in a city within Ventura County, two-thirds (67%) stated that they have three or more community ties to Ventura County. Eighty-seven percent (87%) stated that they have two or more community ties and nine percent (9%) noted only one community tie. Four percent (4%) noted no community ties.

<b>Finding:</b>	<b>Ventura</b>	
	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
Survey respondents who identified themselves as a resident of Ventura County, considered a city within Ventura County as their home city, first became homeless in a city in Ventura County, and/or were born in a city within Ventura County.	412	96
<b>Community Ties:</b>		
Three community ties or more	278	67
Two community ties	82	20
One community tie	37	9
No community ties	15	4

#### **IV. Discussion**

The findings in this report provide a range of answers concerning community ties that homeless people have to the jurisdictions in which they are homeless. The range of answers is based on various combinations of the survey questions that served as indicators to geographic and relational community ties. The idea behind combining questions and answers was to help determine whether or not homeless persons felt that the jurisdiction in which they were homeless was their place of residency and home. The intent was also to help answer the questions that members of the public ask concerning whether or not homeless persons in their communities had family or friends,

had worked or currently working, or had attended school in their communities. Such information can help correct any misperceptions about transiency among today's homeless population.

Combining the questions that served as indicators concerning geographical ties helped determine whether or not homeless persons felt that the jurisdiction in which they were homeless was their place of residency and home. Nearly 100% of the homeless persons who were interviewed in Ventura County felt that the jurisdiction in which they were homeless was their place of residency and home. Ninety-six percent (96%) identified themselves as a resident of Ventura County, considered a city within Ventura County as their home city, first became homeless in a city in Ventura County, and/or were born in a city within Ventura County. More than three-fourths of the homeless persons who were interviewed in Pasadena felt that the jurisdiction in which they were homeless was their place of residency and home. Seventy-seven percent (77%) identified themselves as a resident of Pasadena, considered Pasadena to be their home city, first became homeless in Pasadena, and/or stated that that they were born in Pasadena.

Combining the questions that served as indicators concerning geographical ties with the questions that served as indicators concerning relational ties creates a unique set of answers. The answers are unique because they are combined in a way that allows a third party or those in the community at large to gain perspective in regards to the transiency of homeless persons.

Looking at the answers that homeless persons who participated in the survey provided concerning geographical community ties, helps the third party understand that a very large percent of the homeless population in Ventura County and Pasadena see themselves as "residents" of the city in which they are homeless and that this may be true of other homeless populations in other jurisdictions. Looking at the answers to questions that were shaped by members of the public-concerning relational community ties, helps the third party understand that a lesser percent of the homeless population in Ventura County and Pasadena had family or friends, had worked or currently working, or had attended school in the cities in which they were homeless.

Combining the answers geographical and relational community ties allows the community at large to still see that a significant percentage of the homeless population in Ventura County and Pasadena has community ties to the cities in which they were homeless. Of the survey respondents who identified themselves as a resident of Ventura County, considered a city within Ventura County as their home city, first became homeless in a city in Ventura County, and/or were born in a city within Ventura County, two-thirds (67%) stated that they have three or more community ties to Ventura County and 87% stated that they have two or more community ties. Only nine percent (9%) noted only one community tie and just four percent (4%) noted no community ties.

Of survey respondents who identified themselves as a resident of Pasadena, considered Pasadena to be their home city, first became homeless in Pasadena, and/or stated that that they were born in Pasadena, nearly two-thirds (66%) stated that they have three or more community ties to Pasadena and more than three-fourths (79%) stated that they have two or more community ties. Only 16% noted only one community tie and just five percent (5%) noted no community ties.

Combining the answers to the questions concerning geographical and relational community ties provides an opportunity for a third party to gain some perspective in regards to the transiency of homeless persons. Large majorities of homeless persons may see themselves as having close community ties with the city in which they are homeless which is the case for the homeless populations in Ventura County and Pasadena. Such large majorities do not decrease significantly when the answers to the community tie questions often asked by members of the public are combined. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of Ventura County survey respondents have two or more such ties and 13% have one such tie or less. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of Pasadena survey respondents have two or more such ties and 21% only have one such tie or less.

If someone were to ask if homeless persons feel that they have close community ties to the cities in which they are homeless a third party could answer “yes” and state that a large majority do, based on the findings in this report. If a member of the community was were? to ask if homeless persons in their community have family members, worked or currently working, or had attended school in their communities, the answer could be that “yes” - a lesser but significant majority does based on the findings in this report. Thus, the perspective that is gained by the findings of this report allows a third party to combine the perspectives of homeless people and other community members who live in the same community and help correct any misperceptions about transiency among today’s homeless population.

## **V. Conclusion**

Based on the findings in this report, a person could not say to members of a given community with certainty that homeless people did not come from another community prior to living homeless in their community. A third party could note that approximately 50% likely became homeless while living in their city as noted in this report. A third party could also note that as many as two-thirds to three-fourths of homeless people living in their community may be familiar with their community because they have family and friends who live in the same community and/or are currently working or had worked or went to school in the same community as noted in this report.

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Copies of the survey can be obtained through the following web-sites: [www.phhn.org](http://www.phhn.org)  
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Copies of the survey can be obtained through the following web-sites: [www.vchhc.org](http://www.vchhc.org)  
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