



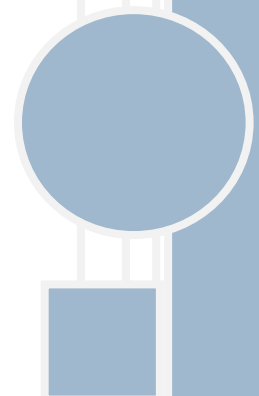
HOMELESSNESS IN CORVALLIS

Exploring the Numbers, Evaluating the Beliefs

League of Women Voters of Corvallis

Prepared by the Housing Committee

March 2017



3/21/2017

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HOMELESSNESS IN CORVALLIS

EXPLORING THE NUMBERS, EVALUATING THE BELIEFS

INTRODUCTION

On December 5, 2015, the Corvallis City Council conducted a work session on homelessness. One of the first Councilor questions was, “How many people are we talking about?” There was no answer to guide the discussion.

There are at least two widely held beliefs about homelessness in Corvallis¹ that confound many public discussions:

- Homeless individuals in Corvallis are not natives.
- Services for the homeless attract homeless individuals from elsewhere to Corvallis (the “magnet theory”).

In 2016, the Housing Committee of the League of Women Voters of Corvallis decided to undertake a project to evaluate two questions related to homelessness:

1. How many people in Corvallis are homeless?
2. What is the reality behind those common beliefs?

WHY HAS THIS NOT BEEN DONE ALREADY?

A Home for Hope: A 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness in Oregon, published June 2008, reviewed the reasons for data on homelessness being so “elusive” (p. 9):

- Many organizations report on individuals experiencing homelessness, but the numbers vary dramatically.
- The nature of homelessness impedes accurate counting.
- Many episodes of homelessness are not permanent.
- Systems for data collection require public resources, which may be prioritized for service delivery instead.
- There are many different definitions of homelessness.
- Changing methodologies for the annual point-in-time count have hampered its use for tracking trends.

We did not enter into this project expecting to solve all these problems. We did intend to make some incremental progress to produce information that may be valuable to the public policy process in Corvallis.

¹ In some instances, references in this document to “Corvallis” may encompass Benton County as a whole. We will be explicit about the geographic scope when presenting actual data.

We did not expect to arrive at one, definitive number of individuals experiencing homelessness in our community. We faced many of the same hurdles enumerated above. However, by collecting primary data from local social service agencies directly, we did expect to be able to arrive at an *improved* understanding of homelessness in Corvallis.

WHY DID THE LEAGUE TAKE THIS ON?

First and foremost, the Corvallis League's Housing Committee wanted to make a contribution that could be useful.

Second, the Committee recognized that homelessness and sheltering the homeless had become a controversial political issue in Corvallis. The League has a longstanding reputation for integrity, nonpartisanship, and balance in dealing with all sorts of public policy issues. Because of this, the Housing Committee felt that the League was uniquely positioned to undertake the work and to have its findings accepted by the community.

These actions are consistent with policies of the League of Women Voters. Since the 1960s, the League of Women Voters of the U.S. has advocated for housing as a basic human need.² The position of the Corvallis League states, *The City and County should aggressively support the development of low income housing units*. The Corvallis League's Housing Committee is a dedicated advocate for affordable housing in Corvallis and Benton County.

SOURCES OF DATA

Some data, e.g., the annual Point-in-Time counts, could be collected directly from public sources.

For the local social service agencies, members of the League's Housing Committee approached each agency individually and requested de-identified data counts, demographics, and trends, if available. Of the agencies contacted, most participated and shared their data:

- 211 Info
- Benton County Health Department
- Community Outreach, Inc. (COI)
- Community Services Consortium
- Corvallis Housing First (CHF)
- Corvallis 509J School District
- Department of Human Services (DHS), Corvallis
- Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center, Corvallis
- LOVE, Inc.
- Jackson Street Youth Services

² <http://lwv.org/content/meeting-basic-human-needs>. Accessed 2/4/2017.

- Oregon Cascades West Council of Governments
- Oregon Housing and Community Services Department, Kenny LaPoint, Housing Integrator
- Willamette Neighborhood Housing Services, Jim Moorefield

All the limitations described in the 2008 10-Year Plan became immediately obvious. Some examples: Because of changes in methodologies, field collection approaches, and definitions over time, trends from the Point-in-Time counts are highly unreliable.³ DHS uses a system for SNAP (food stamps) benefits that is based on transactions, not individuals or families. Applications do contain relatively an unambiguous data item for homelessness among applicants, but that data item was not available in the electronic database. Tallies of homeless students in Corvallis public schools are cumulative over the school year, not at a point in time, and a student is classified as homeless according to a broad definition in Federal law. No other agency that we encountered used a definition so broad. Cumulative counting, as contrasted with counting at a point in time, was common across agencies.

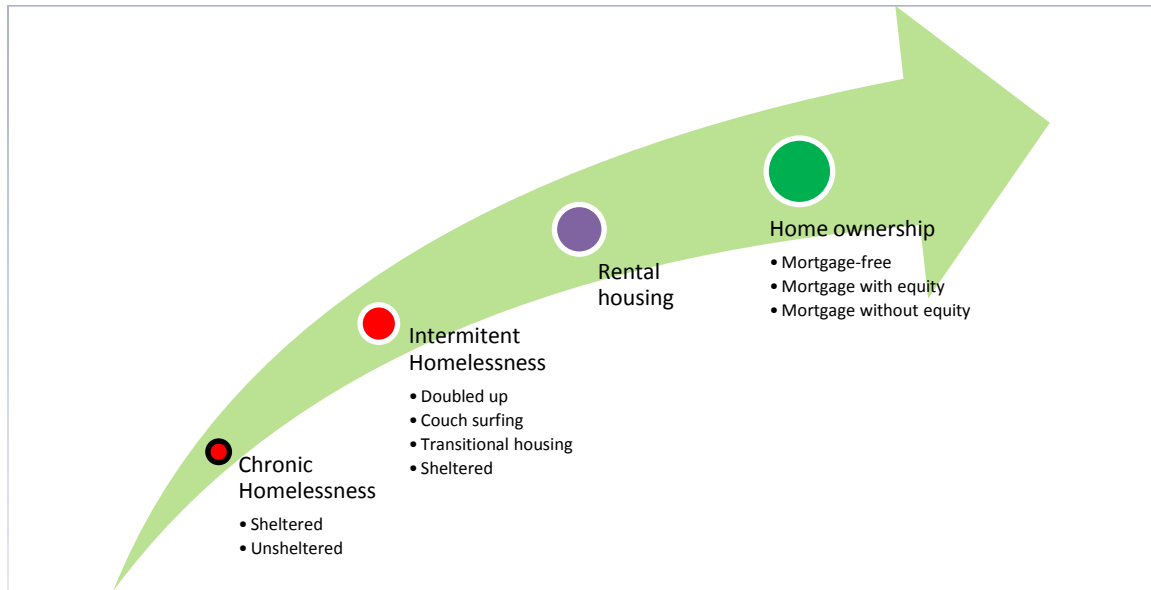
HOUSING INSECURITY

What does it mean to be homeless?

One reason it is so difficult to define homelessness is that housing insecurity is not one thing. Instead, it is a spectrum of conditions, each related to income security (Figure 1). A mortgage-free home owner can be just as housing insecure as a renter if he or she lacks the resources to pay taxes and maintain the home. It is no myth that many home owners and renters live a paycheck or two away from homelessness.

³ Oregon Housing and Community Services, *2011 Point in Time Homeless Count Methodology*, http://www.oregon.gov/ohcs/isd/ra/docs/2011_pithec_methods.pdf, accessed 12/28/2015.

FIGURE 1: SPECTRUM OF HOUSING INSECURITY



Corvallis has the highest level of income inequality among cities in Oregon.⁴

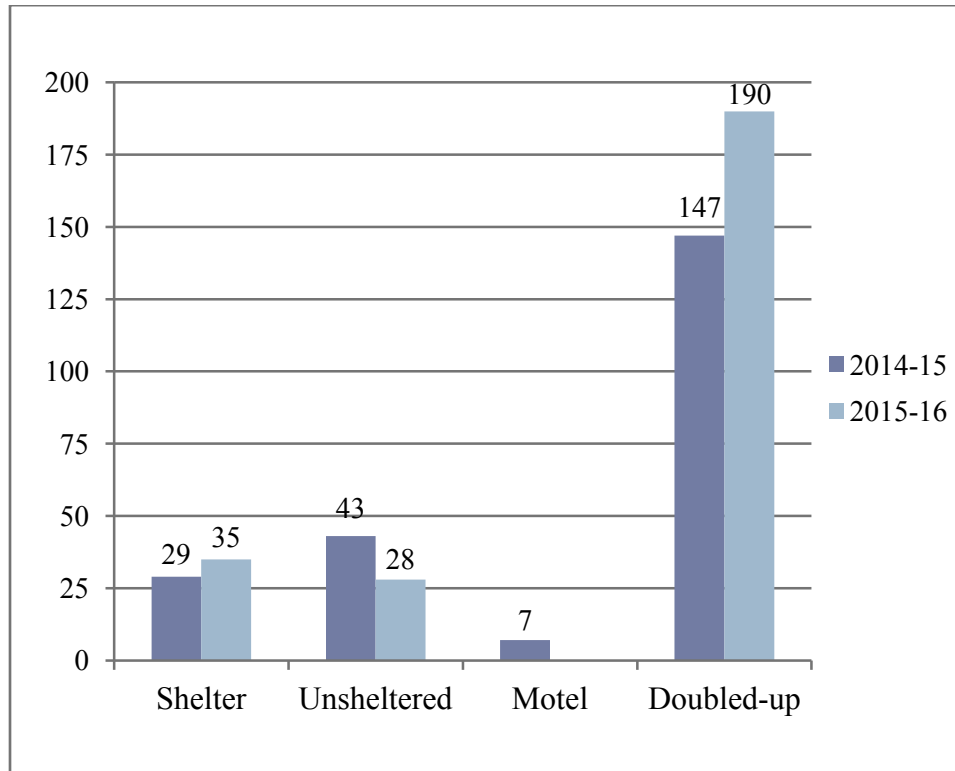
According to the Benton County Health Department, more than one in three Benton County households is cost burdened, which means their housing costs exceed 30% of pre-tax income.

⁴ The “Gini coefficient” or “Gini index” is the standard measure for income inequality. U.S. Census Bureau, “Gini Index of Income Inequality,” Table B19083, 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_15_5YR_B19083&prodType=table, downloaded 1/7/2017.

The lower end of this spectrum is especially well illustrated by data on homeless students from Corvallis public schools (Figure 2). Because the Federal McKinney Vento Act defines homelessness in student populations broadly, these data give us a more expansive picture of homelessness than other sources.

FIGURE 2: TYPE OF SHELTER FOR HOMELESS STUDENTS, AS DEFINED BY FEDERAL MCKINNEY VENTO ACT, CORVALLIS SCHOOL DISTRICT 2014-15 AND 2015-16.



Three out of four Corvallis public school students classified as homeless are in “doubled up” housing situations. While this may be preferable to no housing at all, it is a barrier to learning.

HOW MANY PEOPLE IN CORVALLIS ARE HOMELESS?

The only semi-comprehensive count of individuals experiencing homelessness is the Point-in-Time (PIT) count. The PIT is an annual census that attempts to count all individuals experiencing homelessness at one point in time, one night in January. It follows a standard methodology defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), but long-term trends have been disrupted by periodic changes in the methods and content.

One such disruption is especially important. Under the HUD methodology, counts of unsheltered individuals are conducted every other year. This would result in counts from 2013 and 2015 when the unsheltered were counted to be not comparable to 2014 and 2016 when they were not.

“Unsheltered” for the purposes of the PIT means that someone is staying in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g., streets, parks, cars, abandoned buildings, etc.).

The PIT count is conducted by local organizations called Continuums of Care (COC). Virtually all the COCs in Oregon consist of collections of counties. Typically, Benton County is collapsed into a COC collection of more than 25 counties. For 2013 and 2014, counts for Benton County were never reported separately from the COC collection.

For these reasons, our analysis must rely on PIT counts from 2015 and 2016. Contrary to the HUD methodology, the COC that includes Benton County counted unsheltered individuals in both 2015 and 2016.

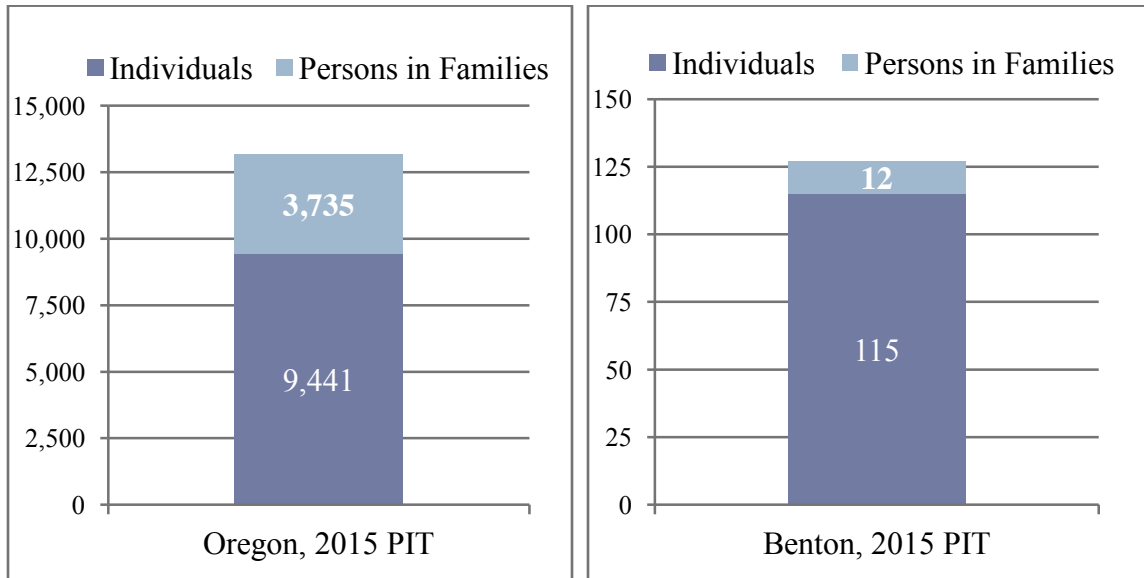
In January 2015, the PIT count, which included the unsheltered, yielded a total count of 13,176 homeless persons in Oregon (Figure 3).⁵

In 2015, Benton County, with 2.2% of Oregon’s population,⁶ counted 127 homeless persons, about 1% of the Oregon total. Neighboring Linn County, with 3.0% of Oregon’s population, counted 222 homeless persons, about 1.7% of the Oregon total.

⁵ Oregon Housing and Community Services, Point-in-Time Count, January 2015, <http://www.oregon.gov/ohcs/ISD/RA/2015-point-in-time-homeless-count.xls>, accessed 12/28/2015.

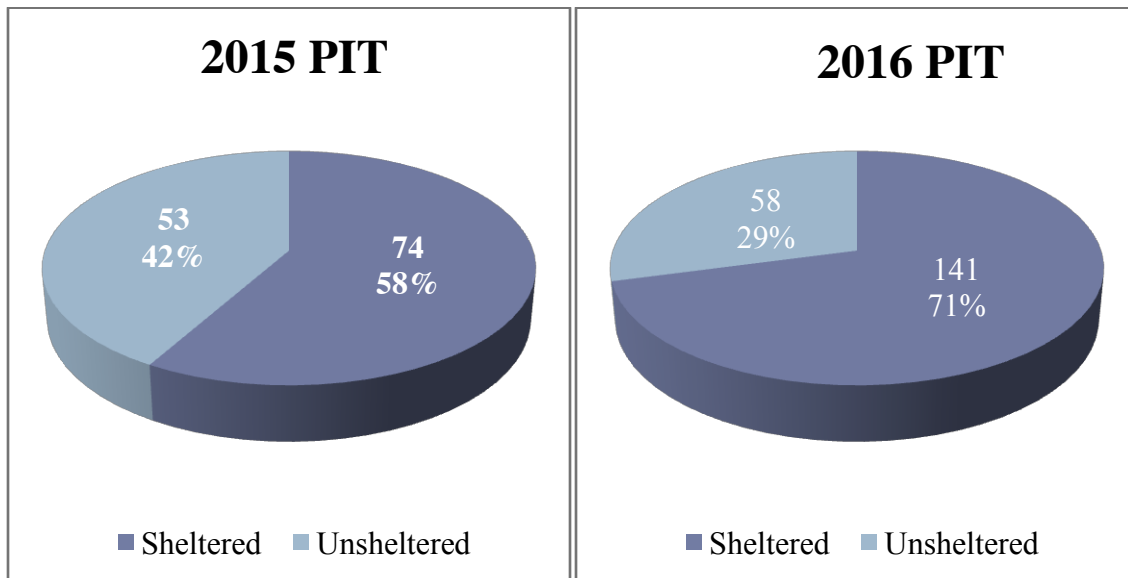
⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, State and County Quick Facts, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/41/41003.html>, accessed 12/28/2015.

FIGURE 3: COUNTS OF HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS IN OREGON AND BENTON COUNTY, JANUARY 2015 PIT



The PIT appeared to show an increase in 2016 over 2015, 199 versus 127 individuals.

FIGURE 4: HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS IN BENTON COUNTY, BY SHELTER STATUS, 2015 AND 2016 PIT COUNTS



A comparison of the 2015 and 2016 PIT counts by shelter status suggests an increase in the number of sheltered individuals experiencing homelessness in Benton County.

This is unexpected, given the finite number of shelter beds available.

OTHER METHODS TO ESTIMATE A HOMELESS COUNT

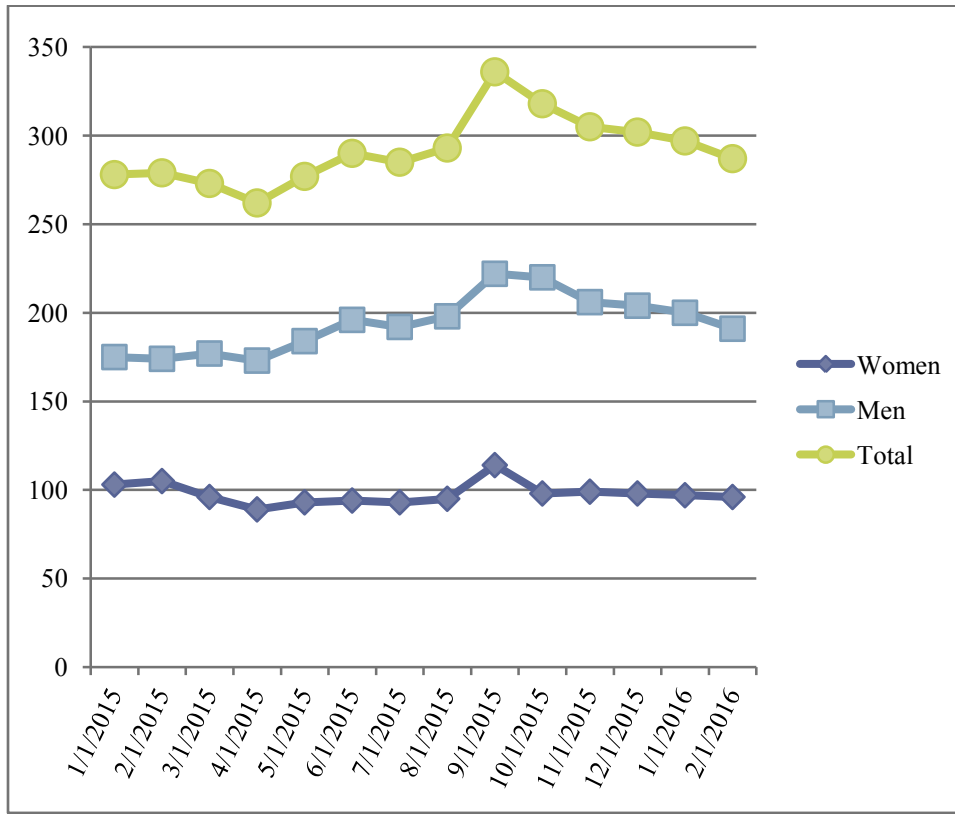
We also explored other potential sources of counts for individuals experiencing homelessness. Although we knew that none of these other sources would be comprehensive, we believed that they might give us benchmarks against which to compare and evaluate the PIT data.

DATA FROM THE SNAP (FOOD STAMP) PROGRAM, DHS

Although the standard application for food stamps includes a checkbox for homelessness, that field was not available for the database search in response to our request.

Instead, address field(s) were searched for indicators of homelessness: e.g., Community Outreach, couch surfing, “no permanent home,” homeless/camping, etc. As a result, these data should count more individuals as homeless than the PIT does. Also, we were able to get monthly totals, which might provide some insight into a trend, and breakdowns by sex, which can be compared with the PIT.

FIGURE 5: HOMELESS FOOD STAMP CLIENTS, BY SEX, 1/2015 TO 2/2016, BY MONTH



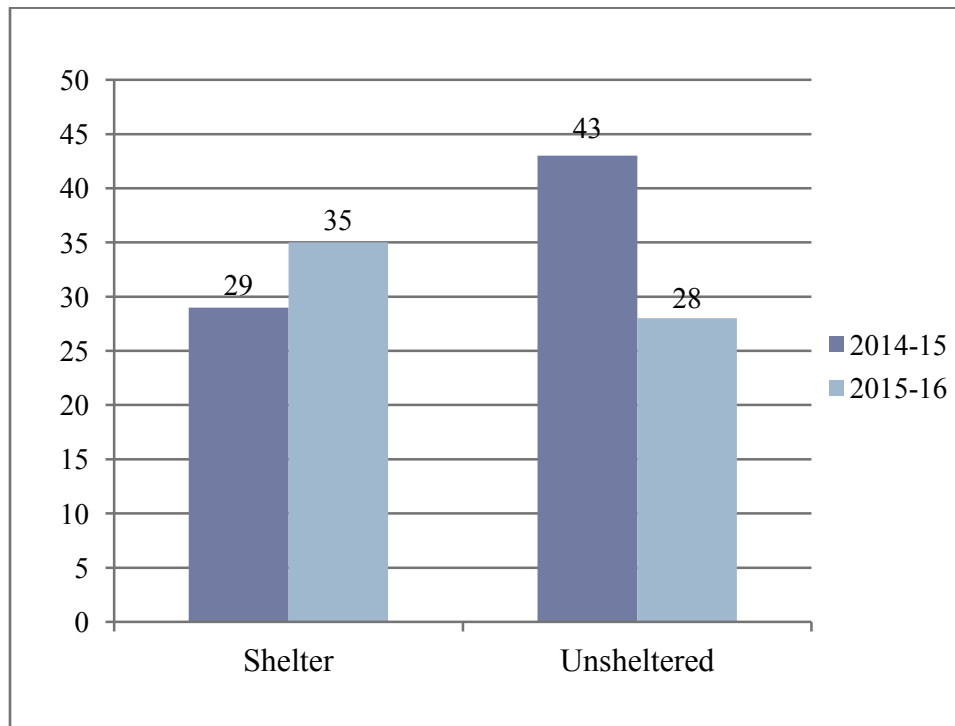
The January 2016 PIT counted 199 homeless individuals; the more inclusive count from the DHS data found 287 clients at approximately the same point in time (2/1/2016). The DHS clients were 66% male, on average; the homeless individuals in the PIT were 55% male.

Over the 14 months available, the DHS data show a slight upward trend for the total and male clients. The obvious upswing in September might be related to the beginning of the school year when families in need may learn about assistance available to them.

DATA FROM THE CORVALLIS 509J SCHOOL DISTRICT

We already noted that the school district uses a broad definition of homelessness based on McKinney Vento, and the schools count homeless students cumulatively over the school year, not at a point in time.

FIGURE 6: HOMELESS STUDENTS, BY SHELTER STATUS, CORVALLIS 509J SCHOOL DISTRICT, 2014-15 AND 2015-16



Over the past two school years, an average of 68 sheltered or unsheltered students received homeless services in Corvallis schools.

The PIT does not report on students, per se, but it does provide breakdowns by age. The 2016 PIT reported 41 homeless persons under age 18, with 31 of them sheltered and 10 unsheltered.

The school district's cumulative count should result in a larger number than the PIT, whereas the PIT includes the youngest children, who would not be captured in the school counts at all.

DATA FROM COMMUNITY SHELTERS

Currently, Corvallis has four primary shelters:

1. Community Outreach, Inc., which provides both emergency and transitional shelter services for adults and families;
2. Corvallis Housing First, which operates the Men's Cold Weather Shelter from November through March; and
3. Room at the Inn, a cold weather shelter for women.
4. Jackson Street Youth Services, which provides emergency and transitional shelter for homeless youth ages 10 to 20.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH, INC.

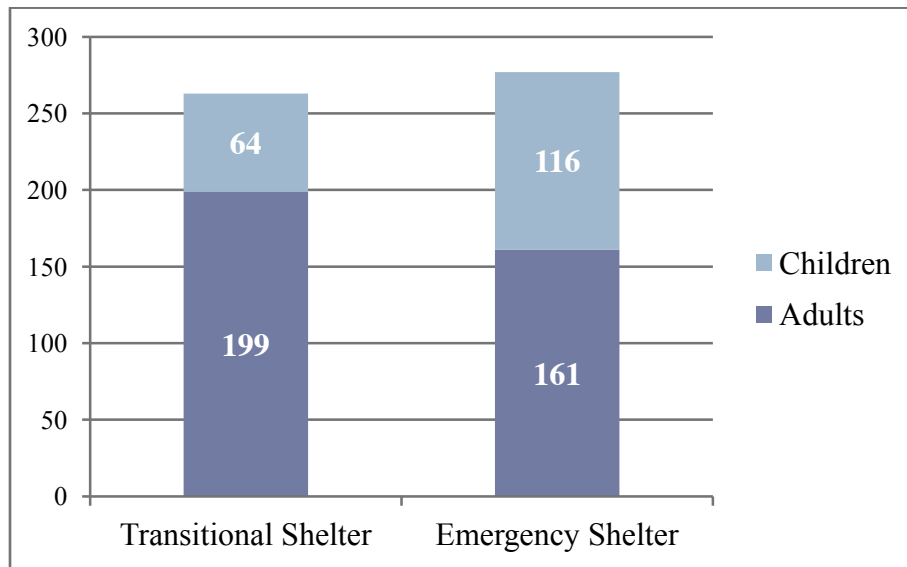
The clients of Community Outreach, Inc (COI) may use the emergency shelter, the transitional shelter, or both. Lengths of stay are variable (and unavailable for this analysis). The COI data cover an entire year, reflecting the fact that COI shelters are open year round. Also, COI clients may move from homelessness into housing. Given these factors, it is not unexpected to see the COI counts exceed the PIT count for 2016.

During FY2015-16, Community Outreach emergency and transitional shelters served 461 individuals, 310 adults and 151 children.

This is more than triple the number of sheltered homeless individuals found in the one-night PIT count in January 2016.

This reflects two facts: the COI numbers cover a full year, not a single point in time, and COI clients who move from homelessness into housing are then replaced by additional homeless clients.

FIGURE 7: CHILDREN AND ADULTS SERVED BY COMMUNITY OUTREACH SHELTERS, FY2015-16



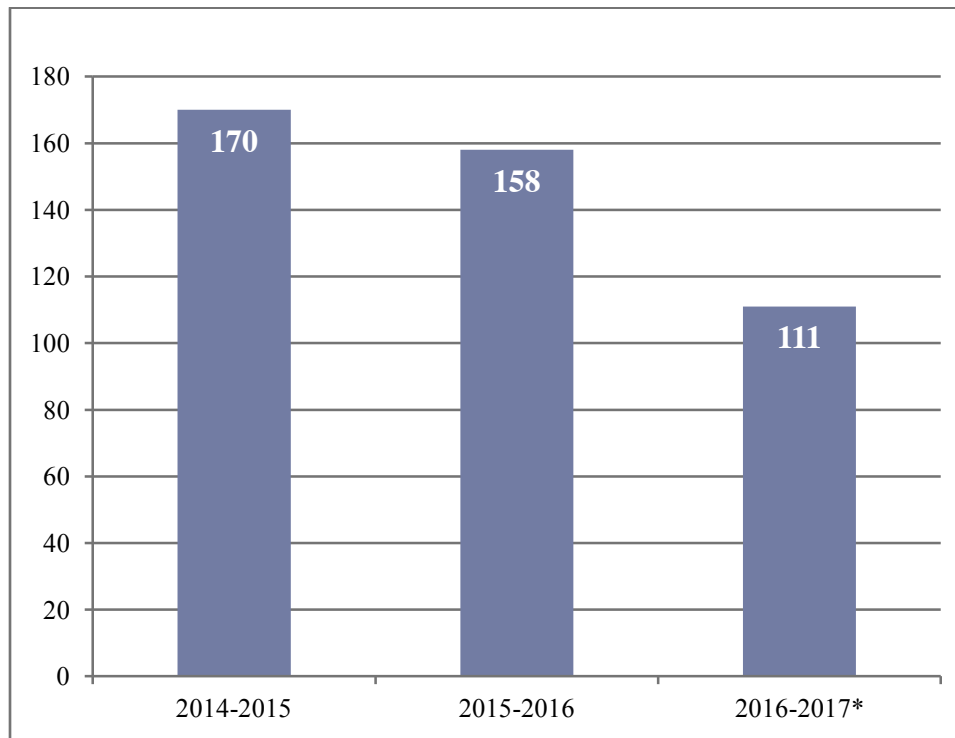
CORVALLIS HOUSING FIRST

The Men’s Cold Weather Shelter operated by Corvallis Housing First (CHF) serves homeless men during the five-month period from November 1 through March 31.⁷ During the shelter season, men are admitted each evening for overnight stays and then leave in the morning. Many of the men served by CHF fall into the category of “chronically homeless.”

CHF provided in-depth data on their homeless clients. Some CHF clients may move to the COI facility (and vice versa), but it is not possible from either agency’s data to assess those movements, so some duplication of counts is probable.

⁷ As of this writing, the Men’s Cold Weather Shelter operated by Corvallis Housing First is in its last season of operation. How it will be replaced has not yet been determined.

FIGURE 8: NUMBER OF CLIENTS SERVED BY MEN'S COLD WEATHER SHELTER, BY SEASON



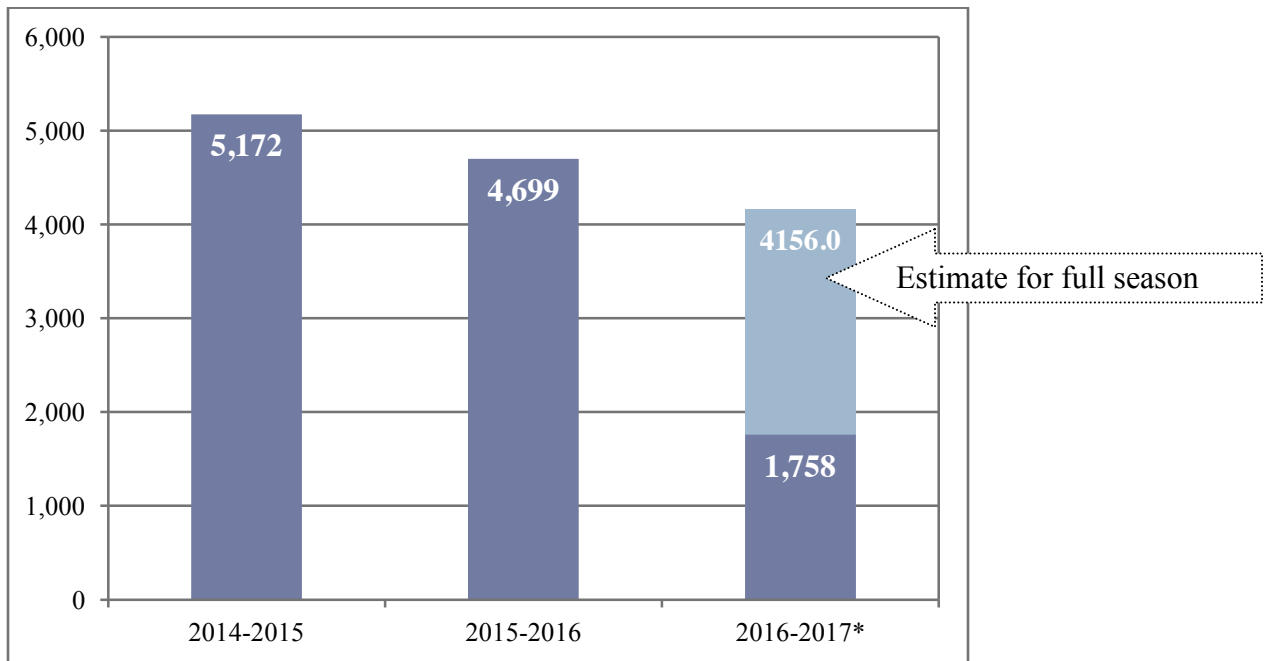
* Data from 2016-2017 cover the 64-day period from November 1, 2016 through January 3, 2017.

Some clients served by the Men's Cold Weather Shelter may move to or from the COI facility.

The number is unknown.

The Men's Cold Weather Shelter has served 164 men, on average, over the past two full seasons.

FIGURE 9: NUMBER OF BED NIGHTS PROVIDED AT MEN'S COLD WEATHER SHELTER, BY SEASON

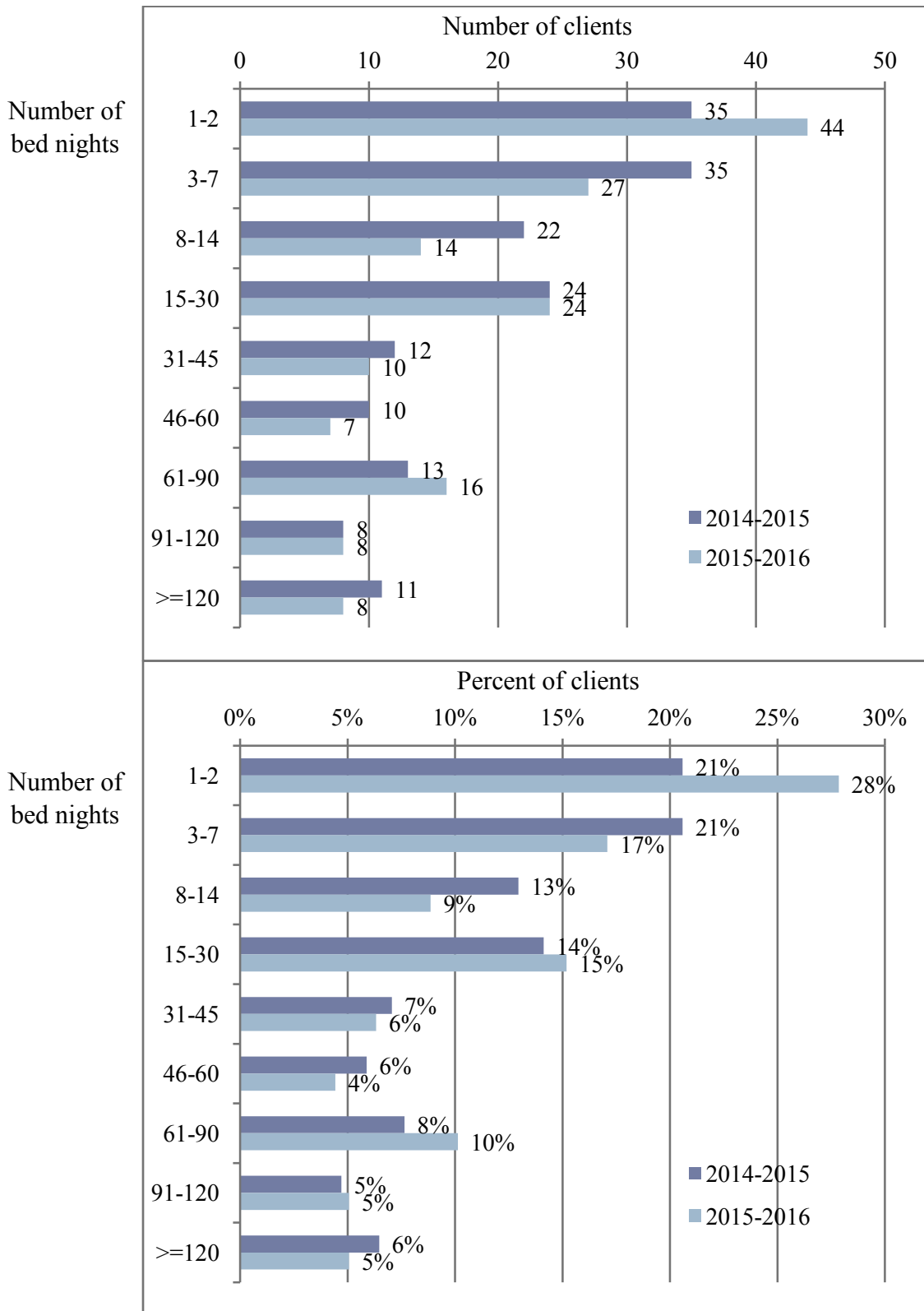


* Data from 2016-2017 cover the 64-day period from November 1, 2016 through January 3, 2017.

The number of bed nights provided by the Men's Cold Weather Shelter appears to be declining slightly.

It is too early in the 2016-2017 season to tell if the number of clients is declining.

FIGURE 10: CLIENTS OF THE MEN'S COLD WEATHER SHELTER, BY NUMBER OF BED NIGHTS, 2014-2015 AND 2015-2016 SEASONS



During the past two seasons, the average length of stay at the Men's Cold Weather Shelter has been 30 days, with a median of 11-12 days.

About 20% of clients of the Men's Cold Weather Shelter stayed more than 60 nights.

About 10% stayed more than 90 nights.

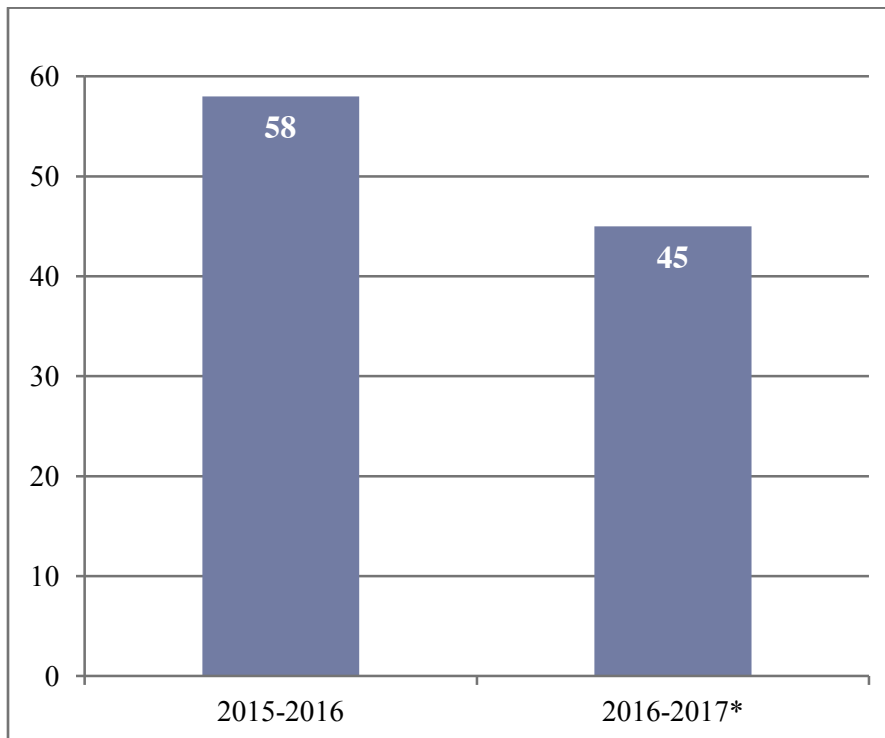
The Men's Cold Weather Shelter was open 151 nights in 2014-2015 and 152 nights in 2015-2016.

Clients rarely use the shelter every night it is open. Hospitalizations, periods of incarceration, visits with family or friends, missing the entry window (entry is prohibited after 8 p.m.) are a few of the reasons.

ROOM AT THE INN

Room at the Inn, which is affiliated with CHF, operates a cold weather shelter for homeless women and now relies on the same data system as the Men's Cold Weather Shelter.

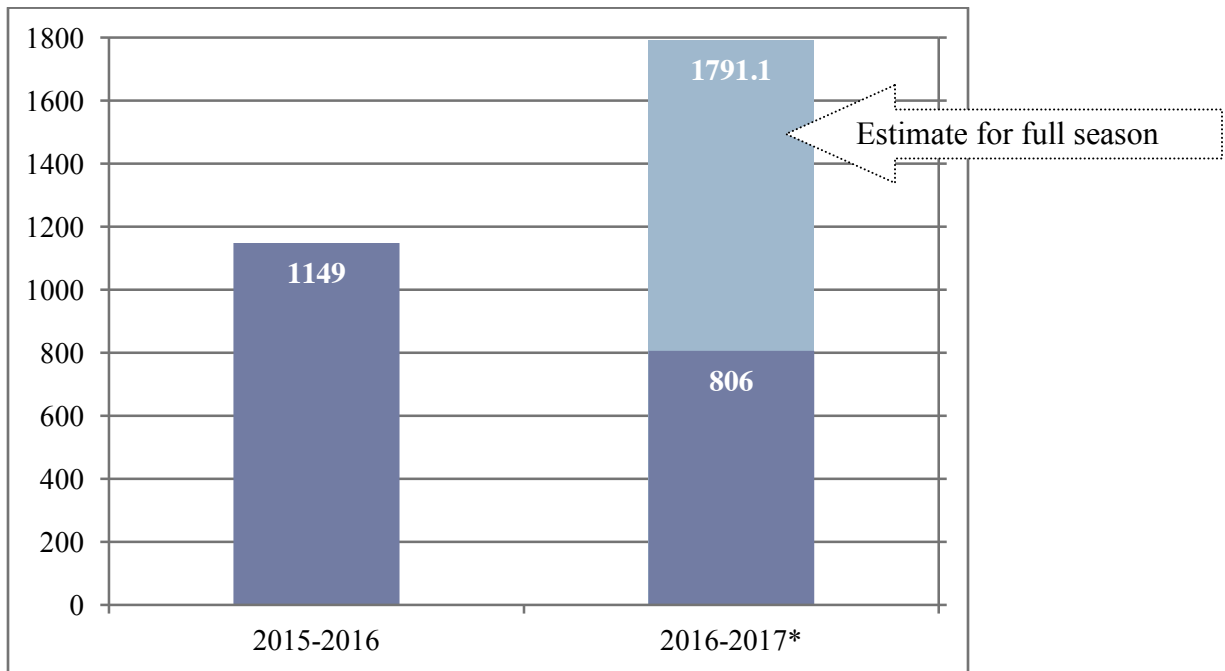
FIGURE 11: NUMBER OF CLIENTS SERVED BY ROOM AT THE INN WOMEN'S SHELTER, BY SEASON



* Data from 2016-2017 cover the 68-day period from November 1, 2016 through January 7, 2017.

The rate of use of the women's shelter for 2016-2017 is nearing that of 2015-2016 at a point less than half way through the winter season.

FIGURE 12: NUMBER OF BED NIGHTS PROVIDED AT ROOM AT THE INN WOMEN'S SHELTER, BY SEASON



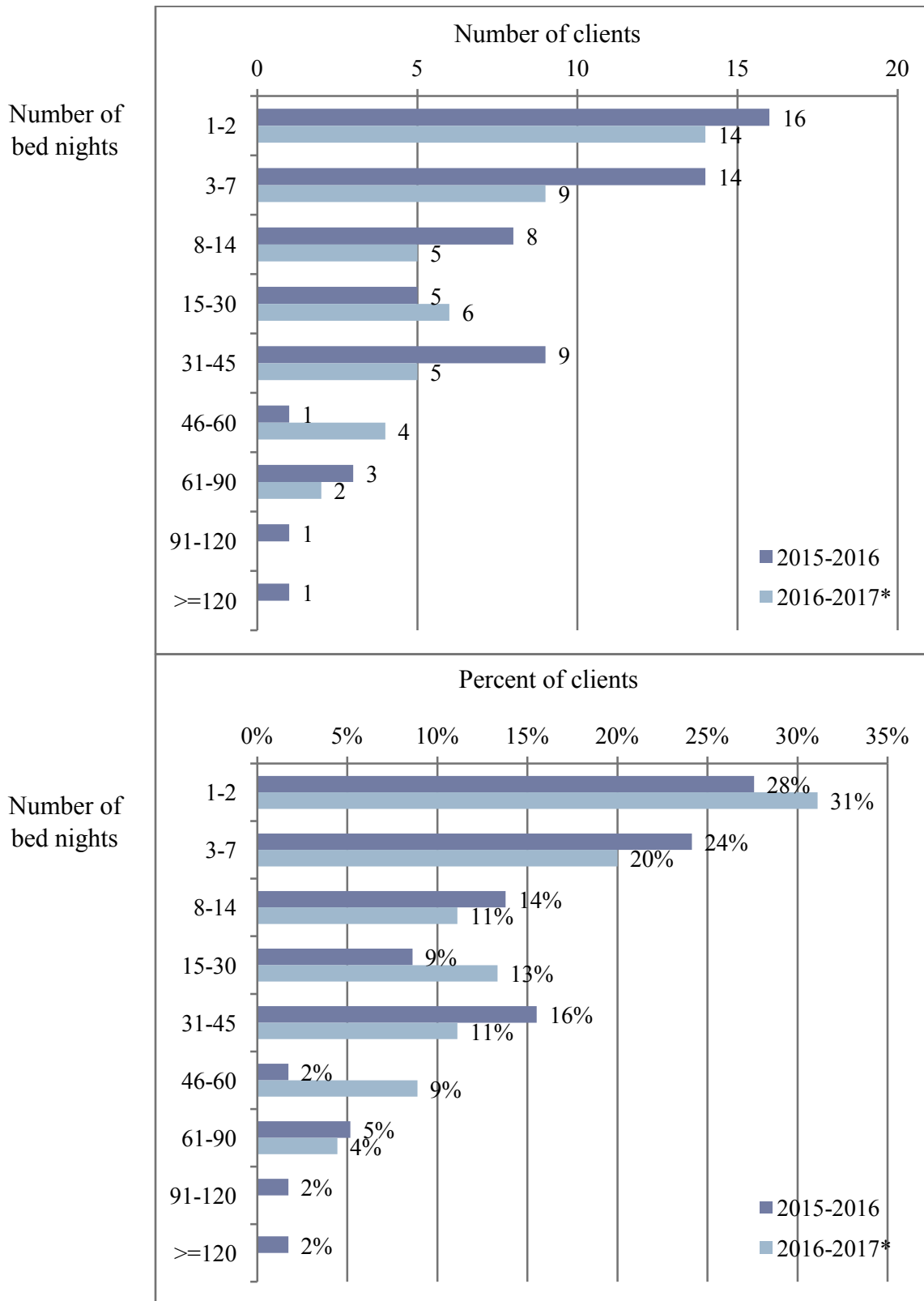
* Data from 2016-2017 cover the 68-day period from November 1, 2016 through January 7, 2017.

The number of bed nights provided by the women's shelter appears to be increasing.

If use continues at the rate of the first 68 days of 2016-2017 (45% of the season), the number of bed nights will exceed the prior year's by more than 50%.

The reason for this apparent increase is unknown. The Men's Cold Weather Shelter is not experiencing a similar increase.

FIGURE 13: CLIENTS OF ROOM AT THE INN WOMEN'S SHELTER, BY NUMBER OF BED NIGHTS, 2014-2015 AND 2015-2016 SEASONS



Last season, the average length of stay at the women's shelter was 20 days, with a median of 6 days.

About 9% of the clients stayed more than 60 nights.

About 4% stayed more than 90 nights.

During the first 45% of the 2016-2017 season, the average length of stay at the women's shelter has been 18 days, with a median of 7 days.

About 13% of the clients have stayed more than 50 nights, a distinct increase from the prior season.

JACKSON STREET YOUTH SERVICES

Jackson Street Youth Services provides emergency and transitional shelter for youth ages 10 to 20 in Benton and Linn Counties.

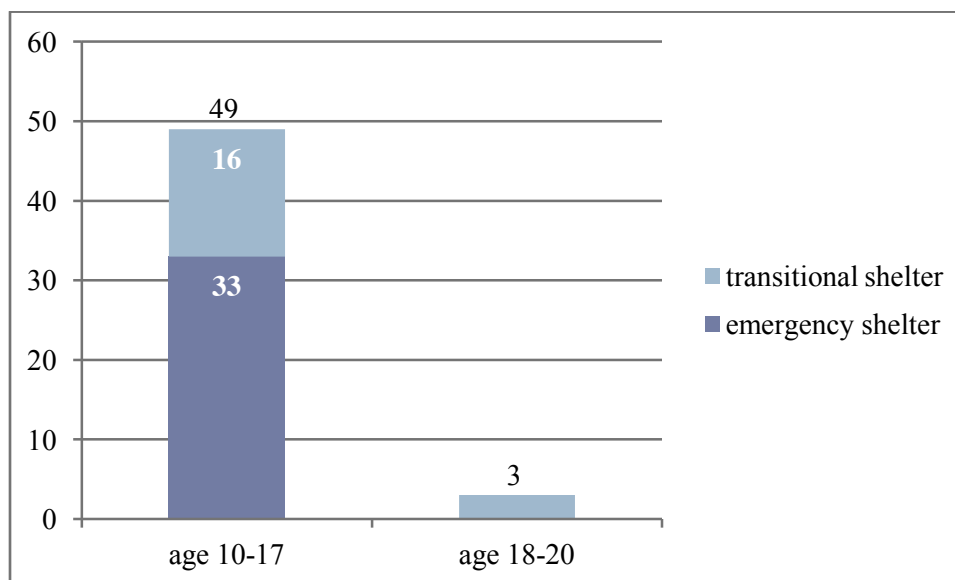
Jackson Street emergency shelter services include stays exceeding two weeks.

Jackson Street transitional housing services for youth age 18 to 20 may be as long as 18 months.

We cannot estimate the overlap between Jackson Street clients and the homeless youth served by the Corvallis 509J School District.

During FY 2015-2016, Jackson Street Youth Services reported serving 29 youth coming from the street, that is, not from families.

FIGURE 14: NUMBER OF BENTON COUNTY CLIENTS SERVED BY JACKSON STREET YOUTH SERVICES, BY AGE AND TYPE OF SHELTER, FY2015-2016



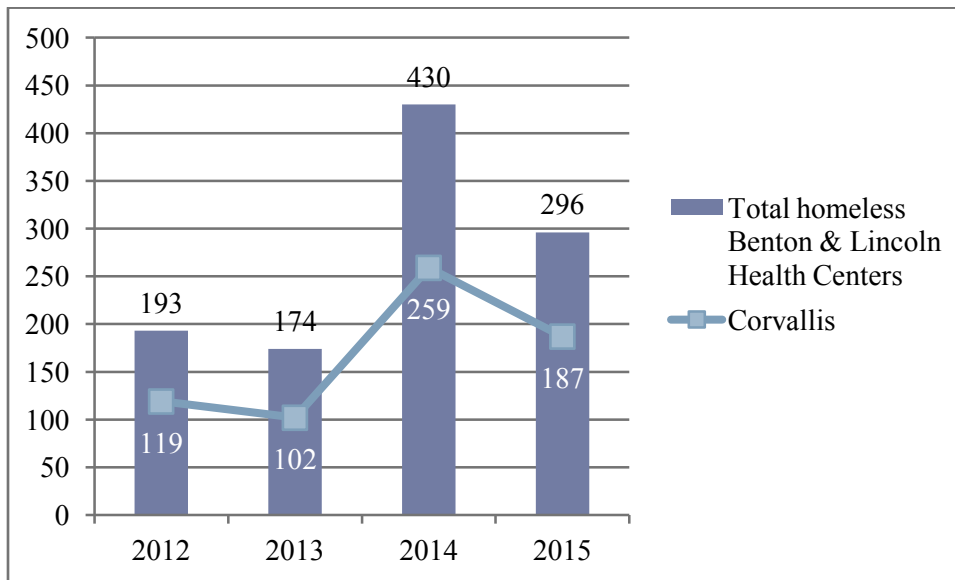
DATA FROM THE BENTON COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Annually, the Benton County Health Department compiles a report on the homeless individuals treated at its Community Health Centers (CHCs). However, one limitation of these data is that some patients treated in Benton County facilities are from elsewhere (e.g., Eugene).

To obtain the best proxy for Corvallis, we combined data from the Benton and Lincoln Health Centers.⁸ Even then, only about 60% of users of those Health Centers were Corvallis residents (Figure 15). The remainder came primarily from neighboring towns: Albany, Philomath, Lebanon, etc.

⁸ The Benton Health Center is located in North Corvallis; the Lincoln Health Center is located in South Corvallis.

FIGURE 15: HOMELESS PATIENTS SEEN AT BENTON AND LINCOLN HEALTH CENTERS, 2012-2015



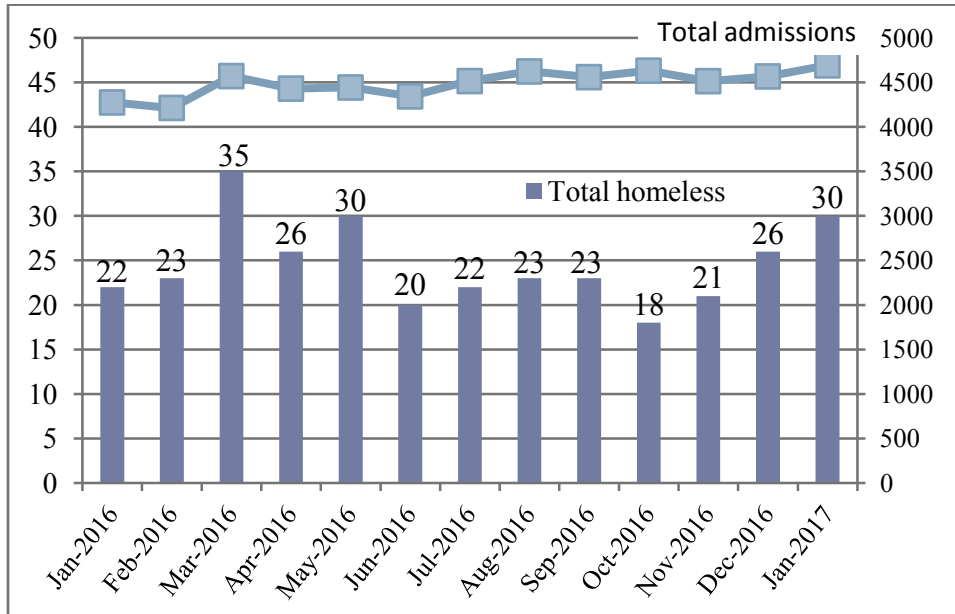
We cannot estimate the overlap between COI clients, CHF clients, Jackson Street clients, and Health Department clients.

DATA FROM GOOD SAMARITAN REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER

The Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center was able to provide month-by-month data on inpatient admissions involving individuals who were homeless or reported a shelter as their principal address.

Although data could not be obtained on the number of emergency department (ED) visits consumed by individuals who were homeless, the count of inpatient admissions does include individuals treated in the ED who were admitted to the hospital.

FIGURE 16: TOTAL INPATIENT ADMISSIONS AND ADMISSIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO WERE HOMELESS, GOOD SAMARITAN REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER, JANUARY 2016 TO JANUARY 2017

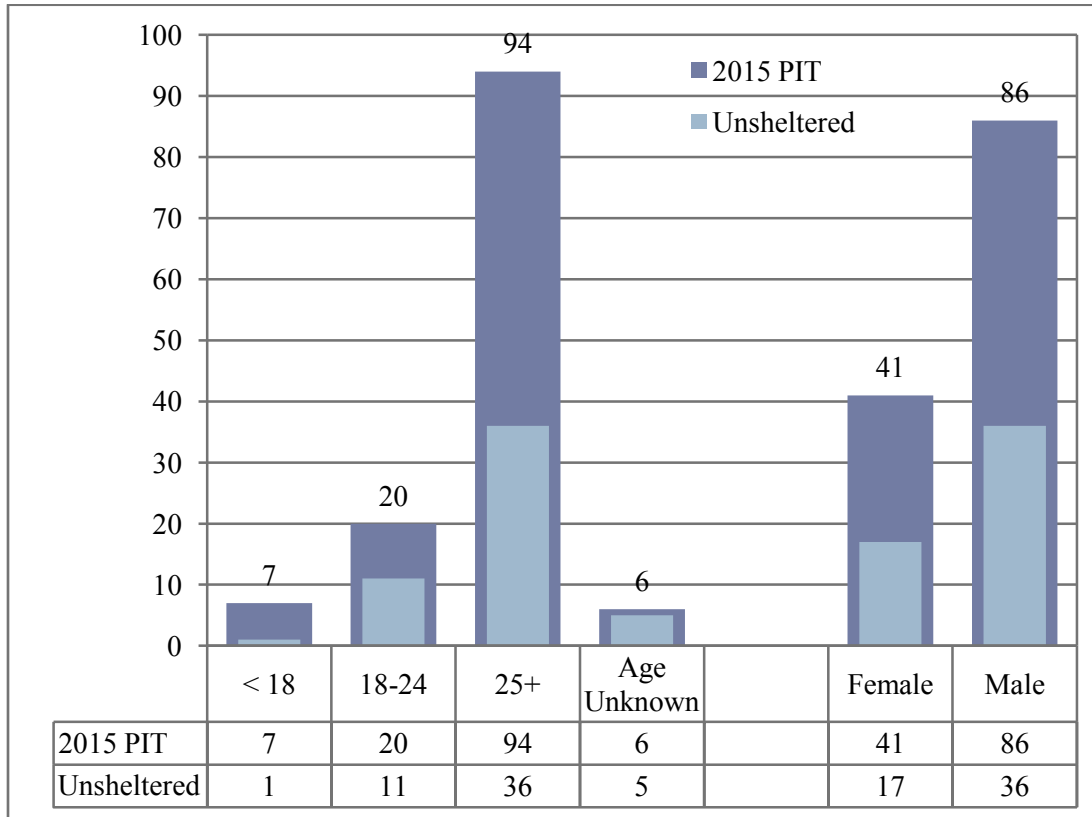


Without additional data, it is not possible to know whether the apparent upward trend in admissions that began in October 2016 will persist.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HOMELESS POPULATION IN CORVALLIS

What can we say about the characteristics of homeless individuals in Corvallis?

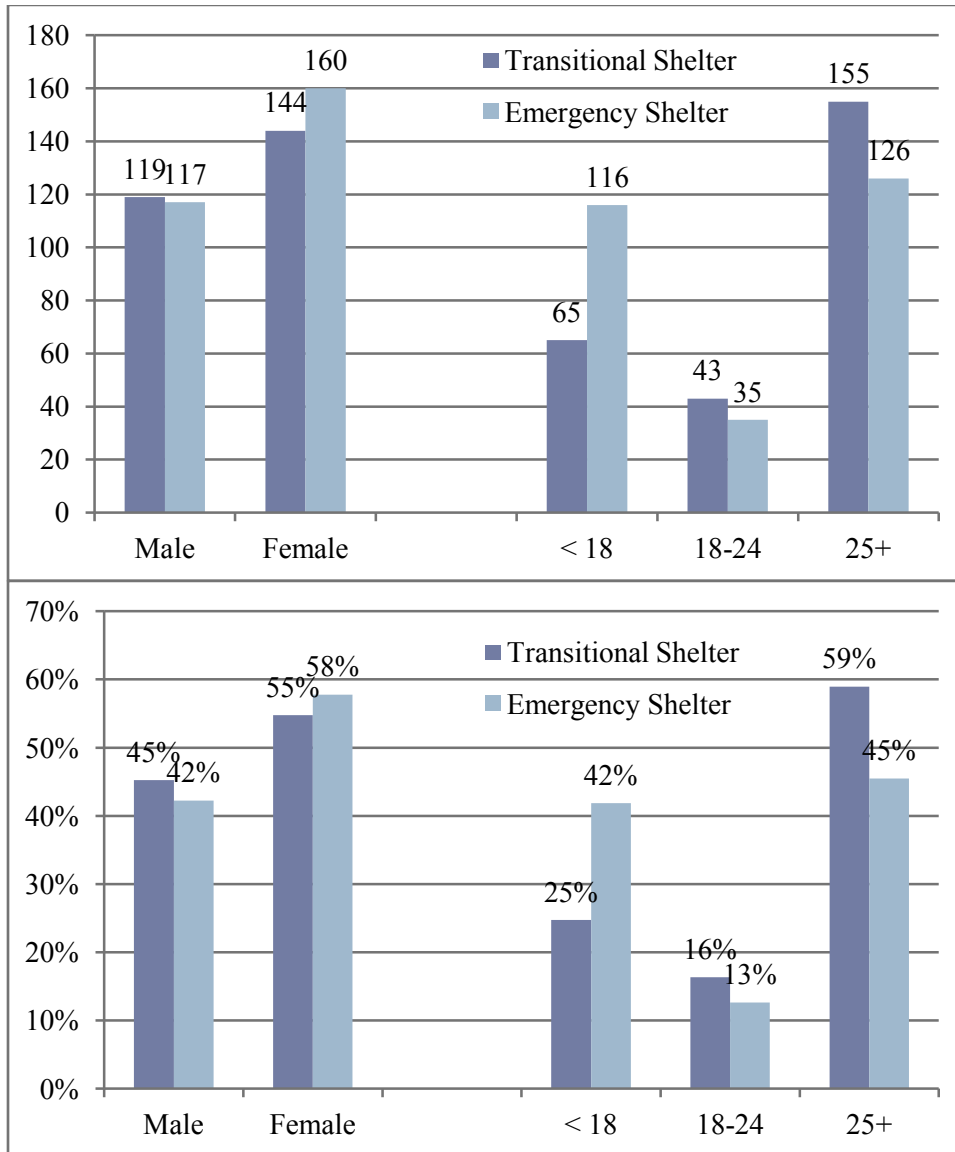
FIGURE 17: DEMOGRAPHICS OF HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS COUNTED IN THE JANUARY 2015 PIT, TOTAL AND UNSHELTERED SUBSET



The 2015 PIT found the majority of homeless individuals were age 25 and over. Breakdowns within this age group were not available.

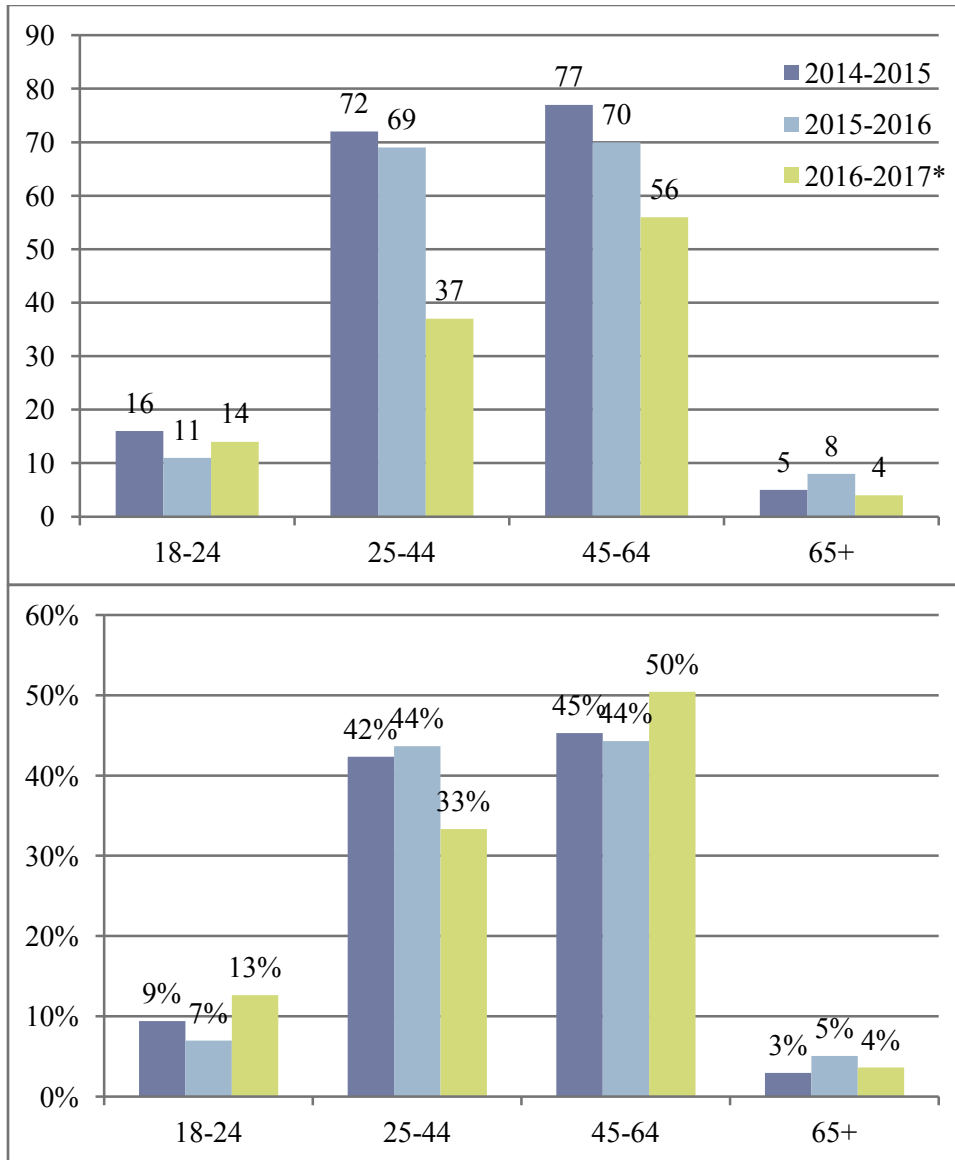
Homeless males outnumbered females by about 2:1.

FIGURE 18: DEMOGRAPHICS OF CLIENTS SERVED BY COMMUNITY OUTREACH SHELTERS, FY2015-16



The demographics of COI clients reflect their focus on sheltering families, especially in the emergency shelter.

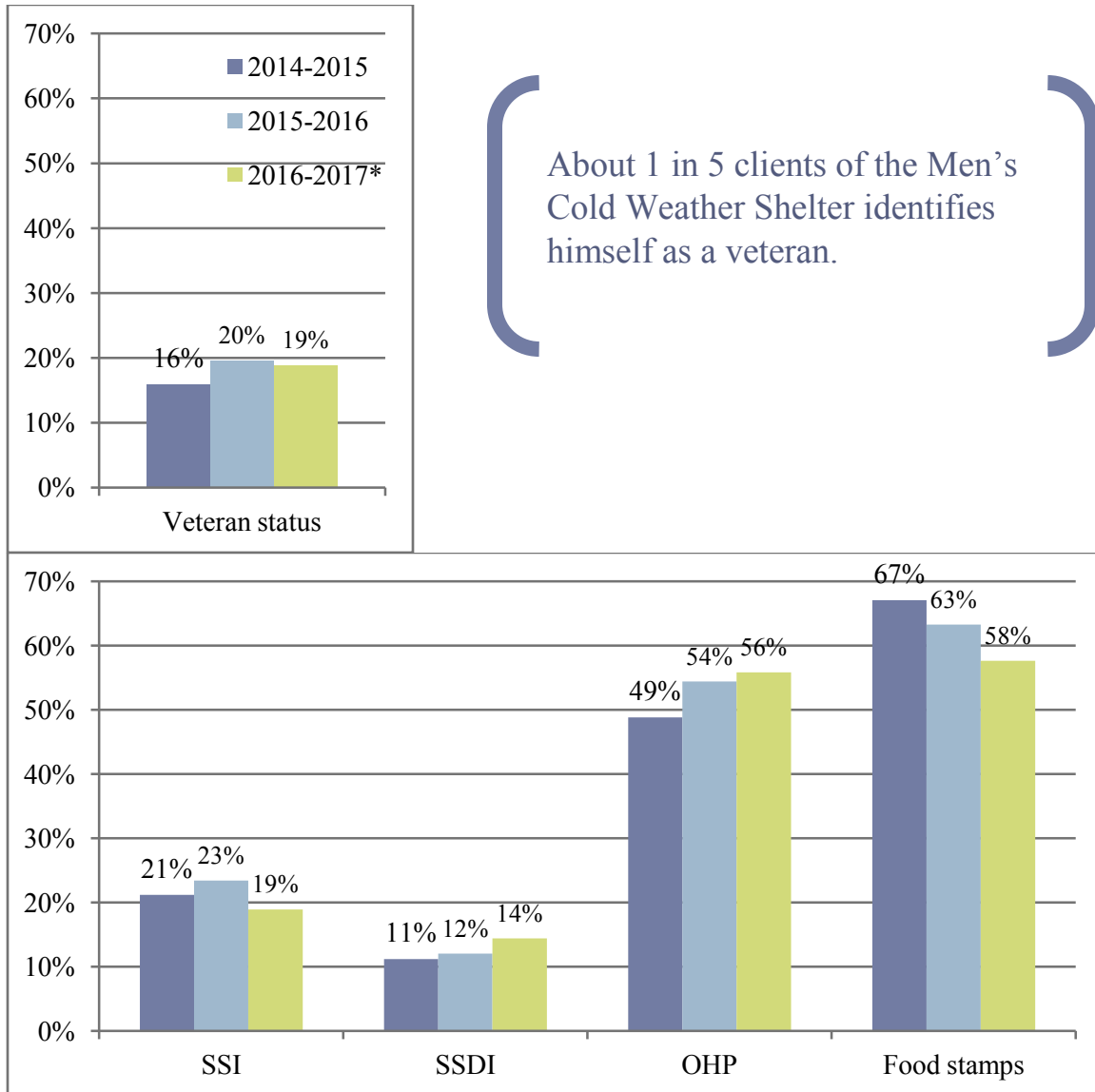
FIGURE 19: AGE OF MEN SERVED BY THE MEN’S COLD WEATHER SHELTER, 2014-2015, 2015-2016, AND YTD 2016-2017



* Data from 2016-2017 cover the 64-day period from November 1, 2016 through January 3, 2017.

The average client of the Men’s Cold Weather Shelter is 44 years old.

FIGURE 20: VETERAN STATUS AND PUBLIC ASSISTANCE AMONG CLIENTS OF THE MEN'S COLD WEATHER SHELTER, 2014-2015, 2015-2016, YTD 2016-2017

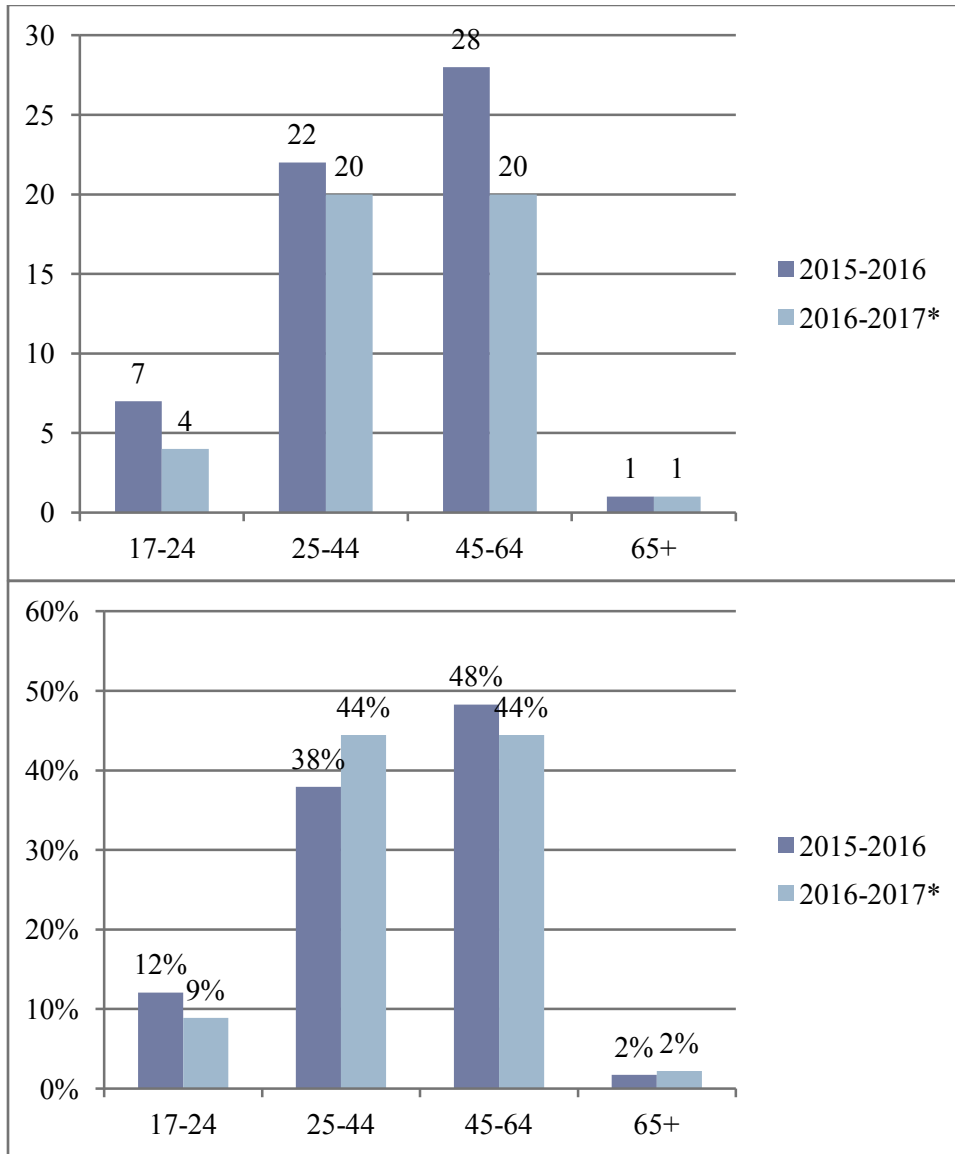


About 1 in 5 clients of the Men's Cold Weather Shelter identifies himself as a veteran.

SSI=Supplemental Security Income; SSDI=Social Security Disability Insurance; OHP=Oregon Health Plan

Among clients of the Men's Cold Weather Shelter, the Oregon Health Plan (OHP) and food stamps are the most commonly reported forms of assistance received. Inexplicably, OHP membership is under 60%.

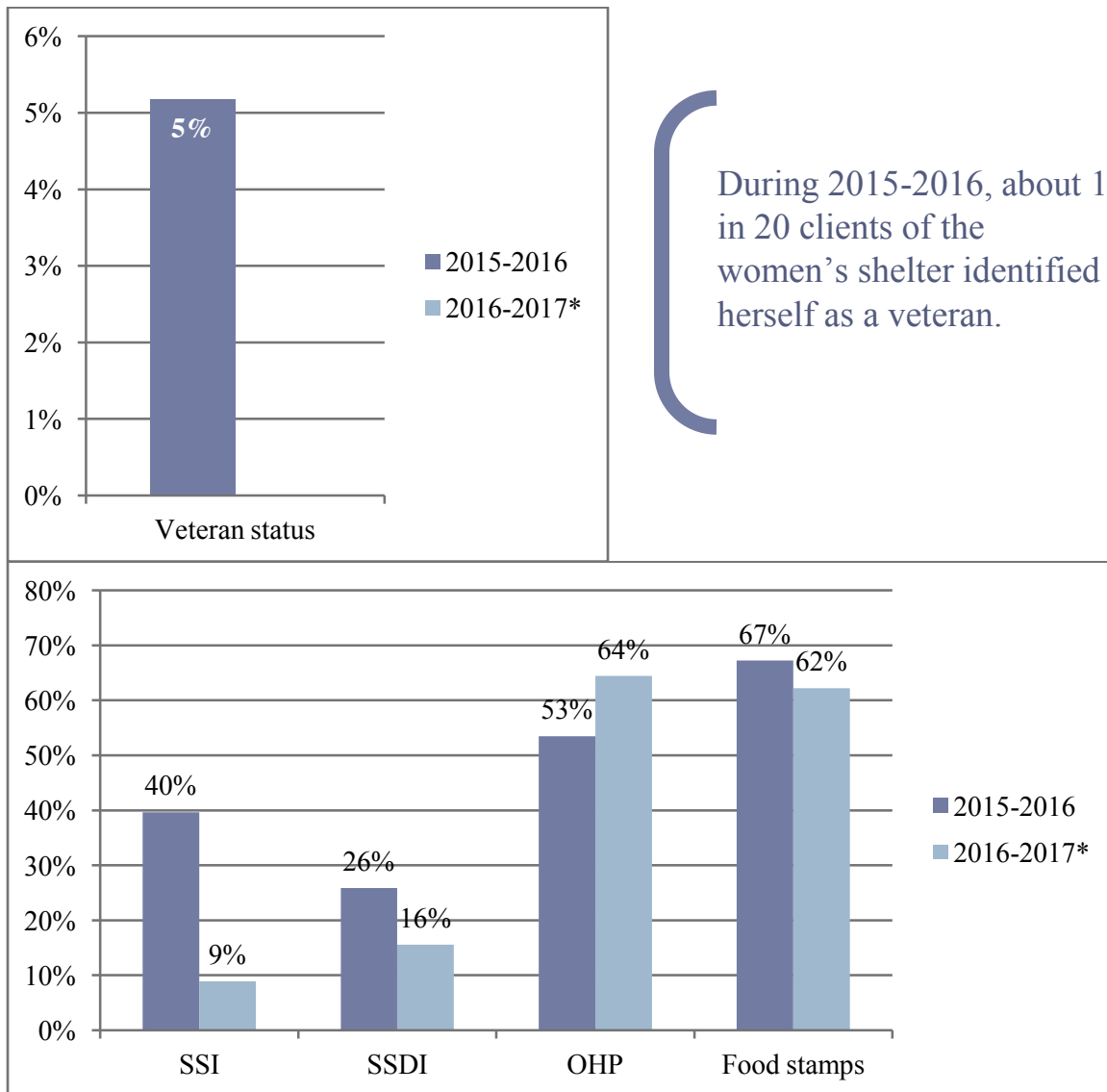
FIGURE 21: AGE OF WOMEN SERVED BY ROOM AT THE INN WOMEN'S SHELTER, 2015-2016 AND YTD 2016-2017



* Data from 2016-2017 cover the 68-day period from November 1, 2016 through January 7, 2017.

The average client of the women's shelter is 43 years old.

FIGURE 22: VETERAN STATUS AND PUBLIC ASSISTANCE AMONG CLIENTS OF ROOM AT THE INN WOMEN'S SHELTER, 2015-2016 AND YTD 2016-2017

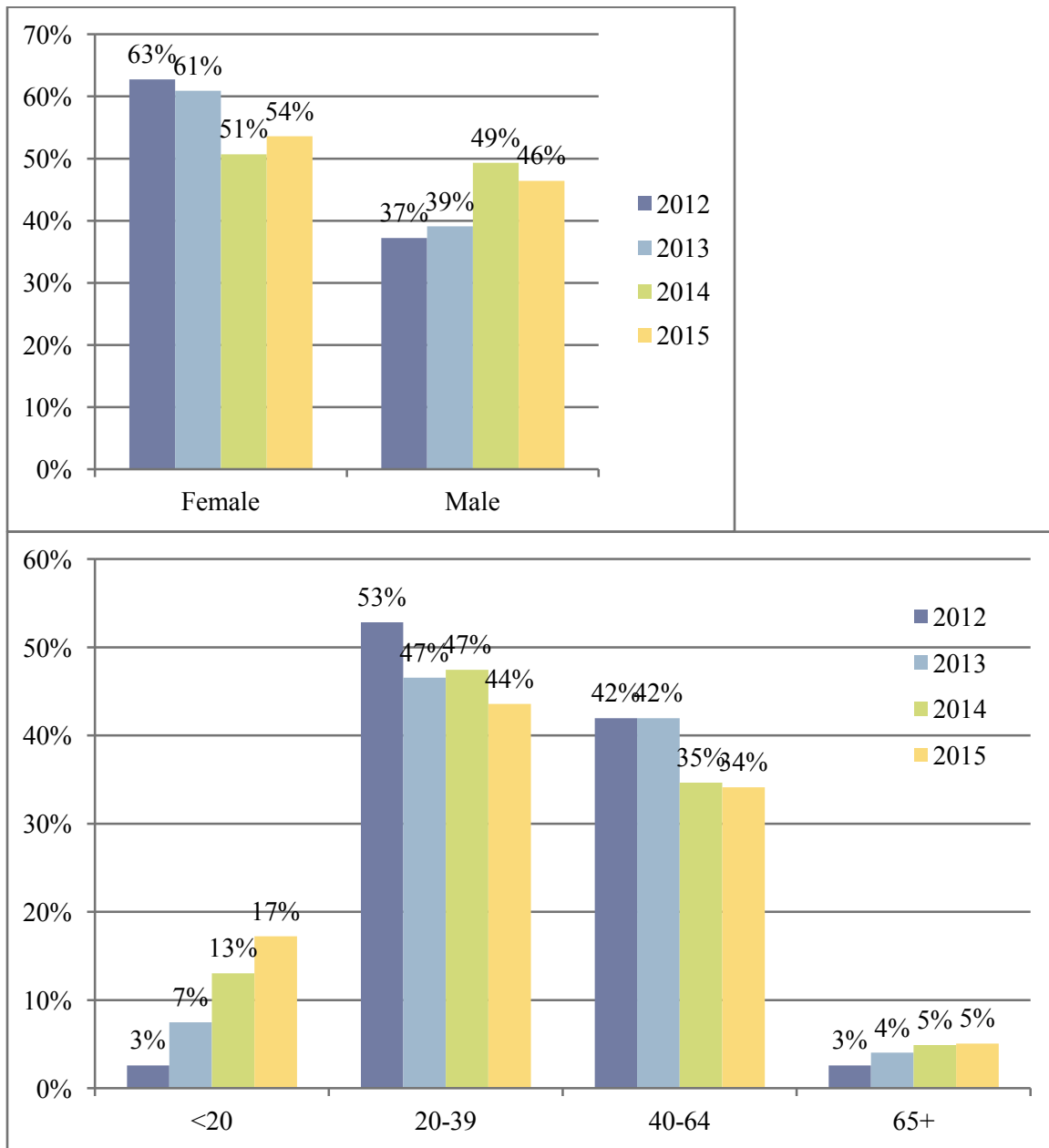


SSI=Supplemental Security Income; SSDI=Social Security Disability Insurance; OHP=Oregon Health Plan

Among clients of the women's shelter, the Oregon Health Plan (OHP) and food stamps are the most commonly reported forms of assistance received.

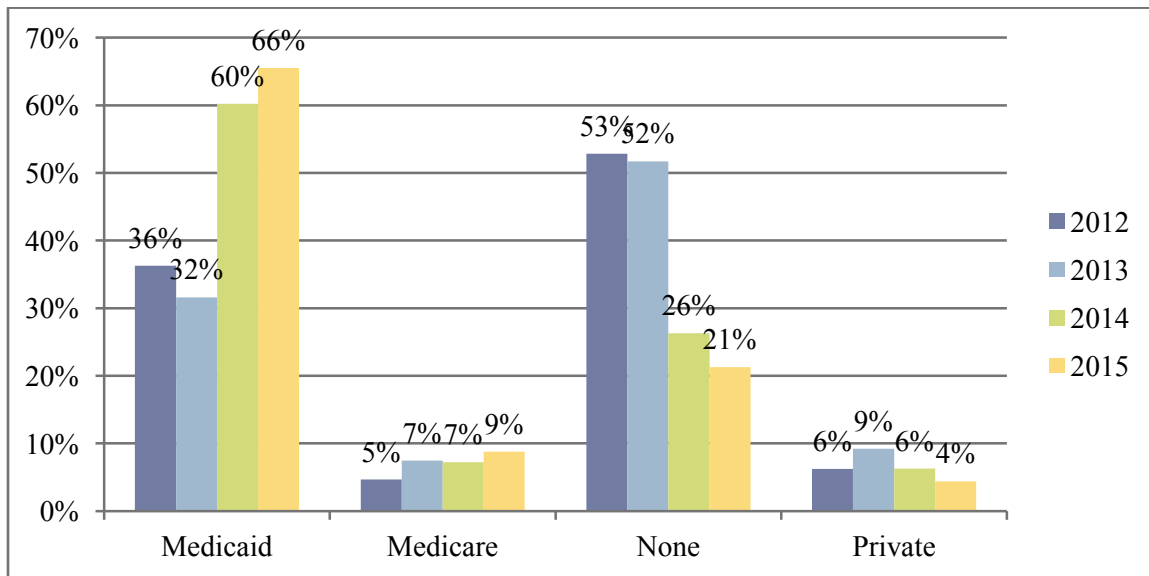
As with the men, OHP membership is remarkably low, below two-thirds.

FIGURE 23: SEX AND AGE OF HOMELESS PATIENTS SEEN AT BENTON AND LINCOLN HEALTH CENTERS, 2012-2015



From 2012 to 2015, Benton and Lincoln Health Centers have seen more male, more youth, and more elderly homeless patients with a corresponding drop in the share of patients who are female and young to middle aged adults.

FIGURE 24: HEALTH INSURANCE AMONG HOMELESS PATIENTS SEEN AT BENTON AND LINCOLN HEALTH CENTERS, 2012-2015



OHP coverage for homeless patients at the Benton and Lincoln Health Centers grew substantially (+30 percentage points) from 2012-2015.

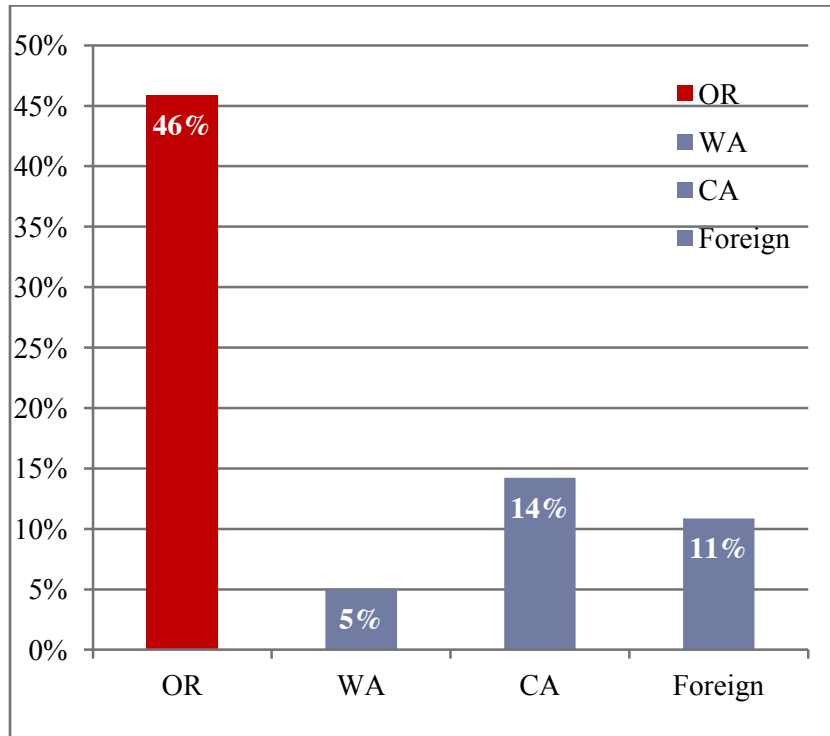
Still, about 1 in 5 remained uninsured in 2015.

ARE HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS NATIVES OF CORVALLIS?

Before trying to answer this question, we need to consider what constitutes a native and what sources we might consult for this information. In our data collection efforts, only one agency – Corvallis Housing First – was able to provide any data on their clients’ birthplaces. And to make sense of those data, some comparative benchmark is also necessary. For that, we turned to the U.S. Census Bureau, which publishes data on state-to-state migration patterns.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Oregon is among the top 10 states in terms of population born elsewhere.⁹ Only 46 percent of Oregonians in 2015 were born in Oregon; all others were born in another state or country (Figure 25).

FIGURE 25: PLACE OF BIRTH FOR ALL OREGON RESIDENTS, 2015

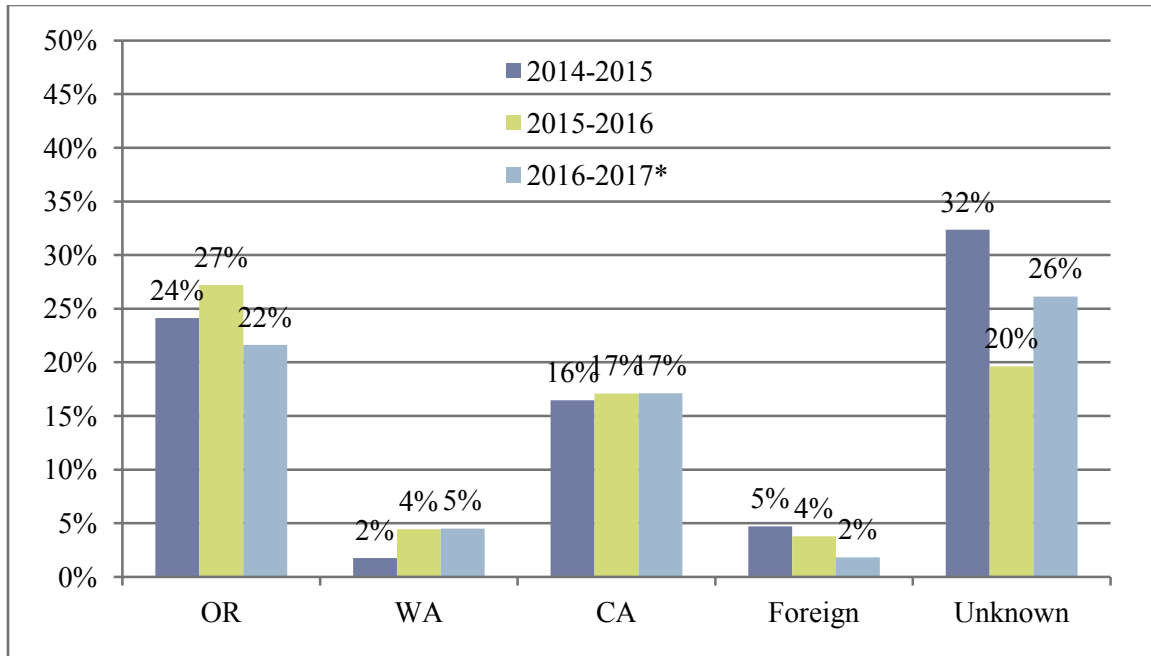


According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey, only 46% of Oregon residents were actually born in Oregon.

The most frequent state of birth for Oregonians and for clients of the Men’s Cold Weather Shelter was Oregon (Figure 25, Figure 26). California and Washington were the next most frequent states of birth for all Oregonians and for clients of the cold weather shelter.

⁹ <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/geographic-mobility/state-of-residence-place-of-birth-acs.html>, Accessed 1/5/2017.

FIGURE 26: PLACE OF BIRTH FOR CLIENTS OF THE MEN’S COLD WEATHER SHELTER, 2014-2015, 2015-2016, AND YTD 2016-2017



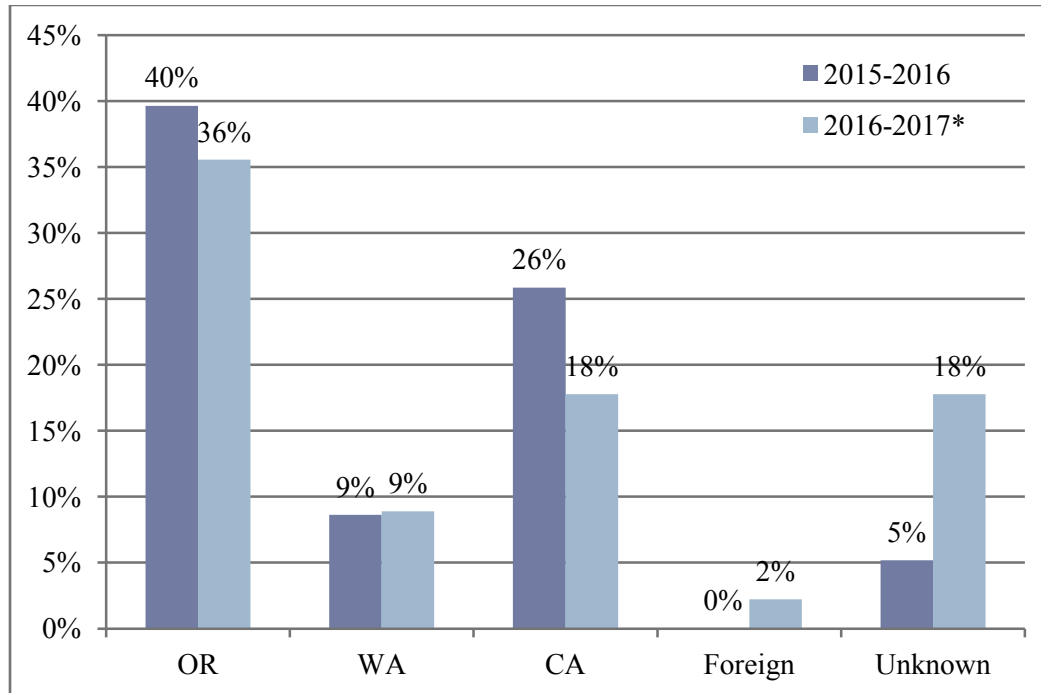
* Data from 2016-2017 cover the 64-day period from November 1, 2016 through January 3, 2017.

The seemingly low frequency of Men’s Cold Weather Shelter clients born in Oregon is not conclusive.

- There is a high frequency of missing birthplaces, and some portion of these would have been born in Oregon.
- Washington and California birthplaces occur in near equal shares for clients of the Men’s Cold Weather Shelter and Oregon residents as a whole.

The Washington and California birthplace data suggest that cold weather shelter clients are similar to other Oregonians in terms of birthplace.

FIGURE 27: PLACE OF BIRTH FOR CLIENTS OF ROOM AT THE INN WOMEN'S SHELTER, 2015-2016 AND YTD 2016-2017



* Data from 2016-2017 cover the 68-day period from November 1, 2016 through January 7, 2017.

Data from the women's shelter tell a similar story, except:

- Missing birthplaces are less frequent.
- Oregon-born clients are closer to the average for the state as a whole.
- Washington birthplaces are nearly equal to Oregon residents as a whole.
- California birthplaces are slightly higher than for Oregon residents as a whole.

ARE HOMELESS SERVICES IN CORVALLIS A MAGNET?

Another common belief is that homeless services (shelter, in particular) attract homeless individuals to Corvallis and Benton County.

To address the “magnet theory,” we look to 2016 PIT data from across the U.S., which allows us to compare Oregon to other states. Then, within Oregon, we compare Benton to its neighboring counties in western Oregon.

The 2016 PIT found that Oregon ranked #2 among all states in terms of the proportion of homeless people who were unsheltered (60.5%).

Only California had a worse record.¹⁰ A report available from KGW.com¹¹ included an informal forecast that 2017 would demonstrate improvement in Oregon. However, herculean efforts would be required to correct a situation where 61% of Oregon’s homeless population (more than 8,000 people) were unsheltered.

In the same year, Oregon ranked:

- #1 in the proportion of families with children who were unsheltered (59.1%).
- #4 in the proportion of unaccompanied youth who were unsheltered (64.4%).
- #5 in the proportion of chronically homeless individuals who were unsheltered (83.6%).

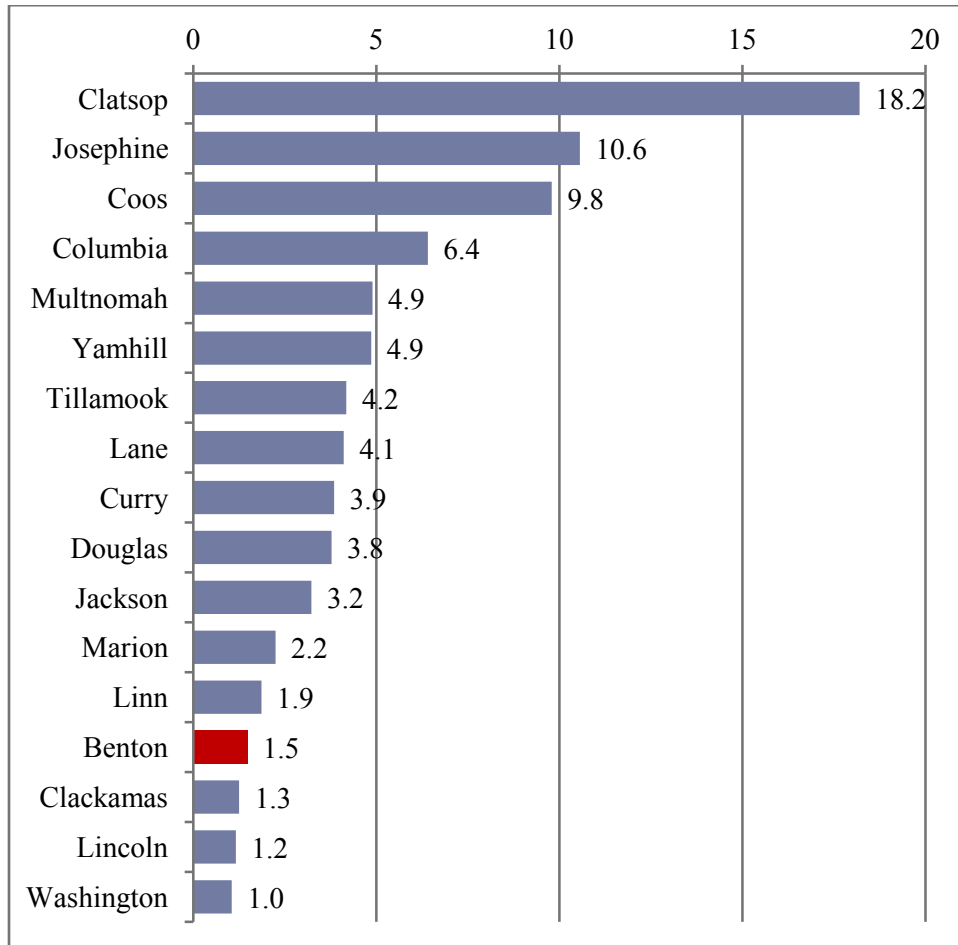
¹⁰ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, The 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. Part 1: Point-in-Time Estimates of Homelessness, November 2016.

¹¹ <http://www.kgw.com/news/local/homeless/oregon-second-worst-in-us-at-providing-shelter-space-for-homeless-report-says/354156861>, accessed 1/14/2017.

Given these data, Oregon as a whole would not likely be a magnet for its success in sheltering homeless people.

What do the data at the county level say?

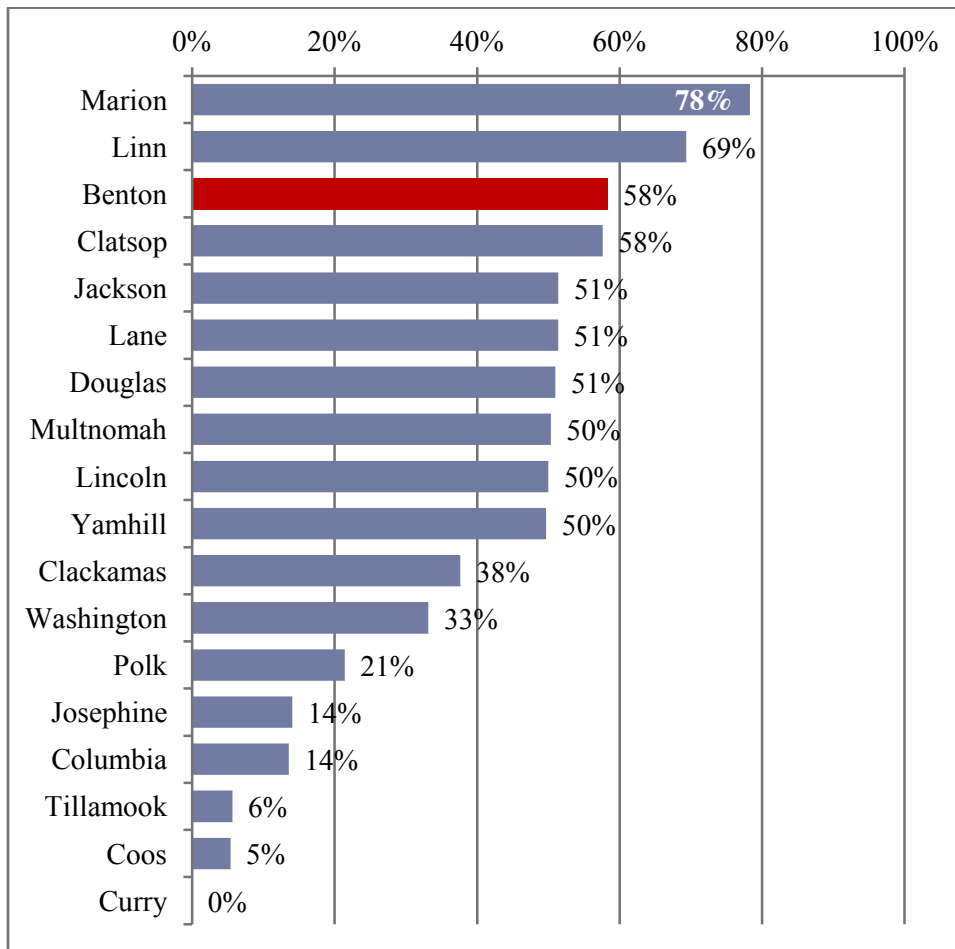
FIGURE 28: RATE OF HOMELESSNESS PER 1,000 POPULATION, 18 WESTERN OREGON COUNTIES, 2015 PIT



In January 2015, Benton County ranked among the bottom 5 of 18 counties in Western Oregon in the rate of homelessness per 1,000 population.

Is there a relationship between shelter and homelessness?

FIGURE 29: PROPORTION OF HOMELESS POPULATION THAT WAS SHELTERED, 18 WESTERN OREGON COUNTIES, 2015 PIT



In January 2015, Benton County ranked third among the 18 counties in Western Oregon in the proportion of sheltered homeless people.

Benton County does a slightly better job than Oregon as a whole in sheltering its homeless population.

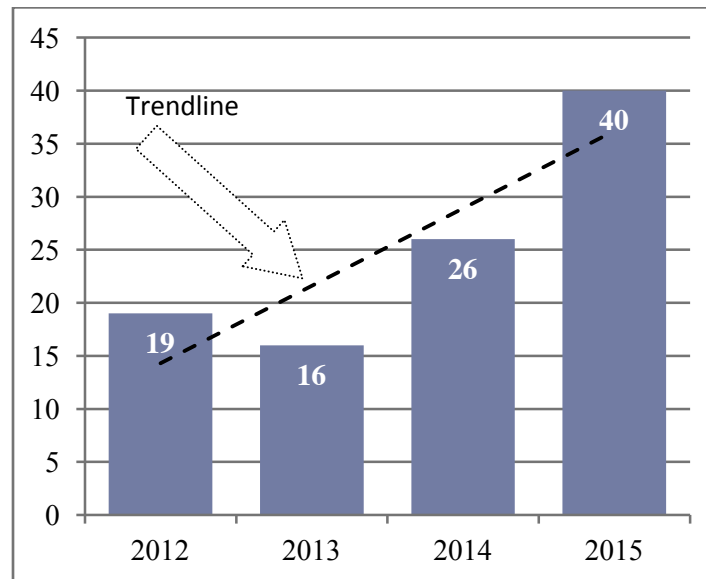
Still, if it were a state, Benton County would rank as the ninth worst in sheltering its homeless population.

Another measure of the relationship between sheltering the homeless and their relative frequency can be calculated statistically. We calculated the correlation, a statistical measure of association, between the rate of homelessness and the proportion of the homeless population that is sheltered. That analysis yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.193. This is not a strong indicator that sheltering the homeless affects their numbers.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE UNSHELTERED?

No group is more difficult to count than the unsheltered. In our extensive search across service agencies, only one provided any information whatsoever on particular unsheltered situations: streets, camps, and bridges. Unfortunately, these data are not limited to Corvallis or Benton County.

FIGURE 30: HOMELESS PERSONS REPORTING STREET, CAMP, BRIDGE RESIDENCE AT LINN AND BENTON COUNTY COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS, 2012-2015



According to the Benton County Health Department, the number of homeless people on the street, camping, and living under bridges is clearly growing.

How many of these people are residents of Corvallis or Benton County is unknown.

CONCLUSION: WHAT IS THE SIZE OF THE HOMELESS POPULATION?

Clearly, the data we were able to collect is unlikely to account for all homeless people in Corvallis or Benton County. But, looking back to the City Council work session of December 2015, some number may be better than none when services and policies must be planned and funded.

This is not to say that any number is better than none.

For a number to be better than none, it must be arrived at thoughtfully, reasonably, and with complete transparency.

Two factors in particular must be taken into account:

1. A point-in-time snapshot will differ from a number that is accumulated over time.
2. Some types of homeless people may be more likely to be underrepresented in data sources than others. As our analysis has shown, data on unsheltered homeless people may be much less complete than data on those who are sheltered.

Ultimately, we concluded that a single number would not be very useful and, in fact, would be prone to misuse.

Therefore, our aim was to establish a reasonable range.

A range implies a minimum and a maximum.

We chose the point-in-time snapshot as our only reasonable minimum. First, there is no alternative and the PIT is collected with a known methodology. The most important limitation of the point-in-time is that some homeless people, particularly the unsheltered, may be missed during the point-in-time census. Regardless, we can be assured that the number of homeless people is not less than the point-in-time count.

Finding the maximum is more problematic. It must be constructed.

To estimate a maximum, we included the following:

For the sheltered homeless:

- Clients of COI transitional and emergency shelters.
- Clients of CHF Men's Cold Weather Shelter.
- Clients of Room at the Inn women's shelter.
- Clients of Jackson Street Youth Services transitional and emergency shelter.

These four sites represent the only major sources of shelter for the homeless in Corvallis. While some overlap will exist as a result of transfers from one shelter to another, those numbers are unlikely to materially impact the conclusions.

Importantly, COI and Jackson Street shelters operate year-round, while the men's and women's shelters do not. This is only one of the reasons that accounting for the unsheltered homeless is critical.

For the unsheltered homeless:

- Unsheltered students of Corvallis 509J school district. Sheltered students were excluded because they are likely captured elsewhere (e.g., COI or Jackson Street). Similarly, 509J students who were classified as "doubled up" were excluded because that category is unique to the school district's accounting. Unfortunately, the extent of this "doubled up" or "couch surfing" in the general population is unknown.
- Patients of Linn and Benton County CHCs whose residence was reported as street, camp, or bridge. Other patients of the CHCs are not counted because that would likely lead to significant double counting. While it is not possible to separate Linn and Benton County in these data, this is unlikely to materially impact the conclusions.
- Unsheltered people from the PIT. Their inclusion is our best attempt to counteract the obvious problem of undercounting of the unsheltered. Other sources simply do not exist.

Because of the myriad of problems with data on unsheltered persons, we also adopted a second method of indirectly estimating the unsheltered.

- We used the ratio of unsheltered to total homeless persons (42%) in Benton County from the 2015 PIT and applied it to the sheltered homeless counts from the four sources above.
- The result was an estimated annual count of unsheltered homeless persons that did not rely on school district or CHC data and did not simply accept the PIT count of unsheltered persons, which did not cover the entire year.

FIGURE 31: ESTIMATED COUNT OF HOMELESS PERSONS, CORVALLIS/BENTON COUNTY, 2015 — METHOD 1

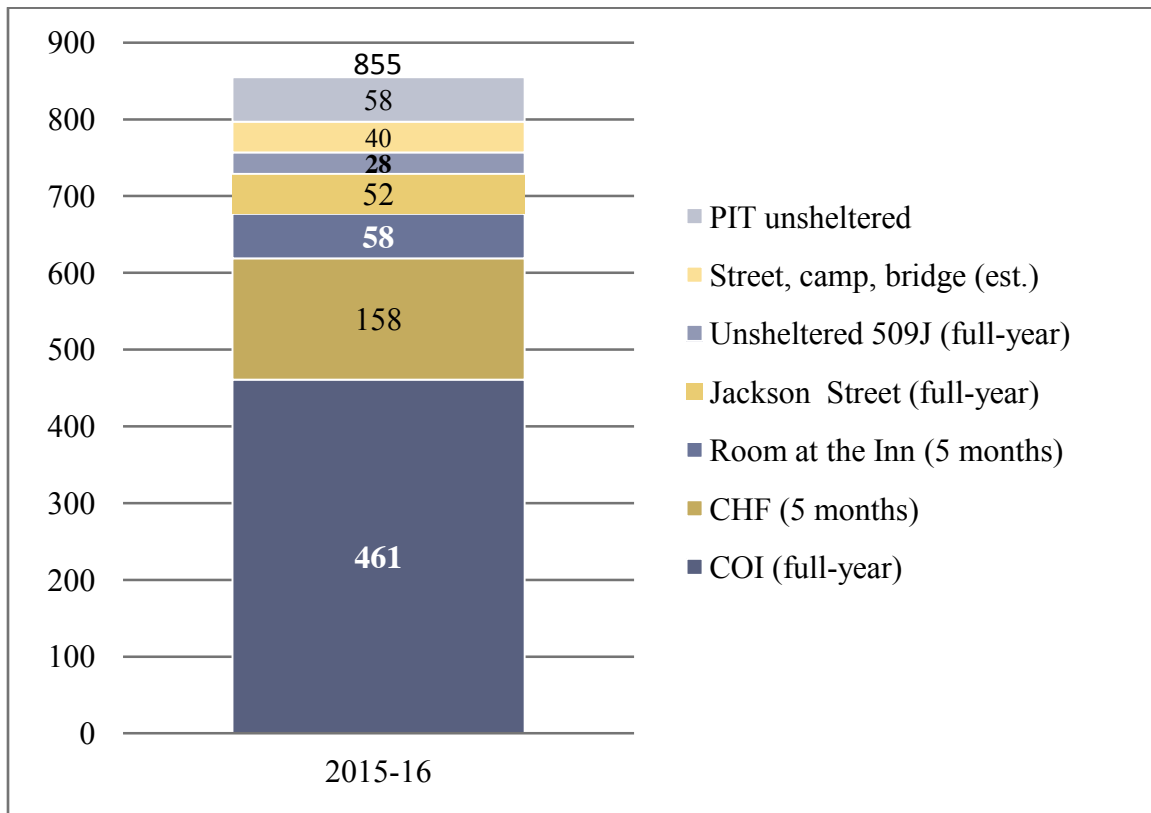


FIGURE 32: ESTIMATED COUNT OF HOMELESS PERSONS, CORVALLIS/BENTON COUNTY, 2015 — METHOD 2

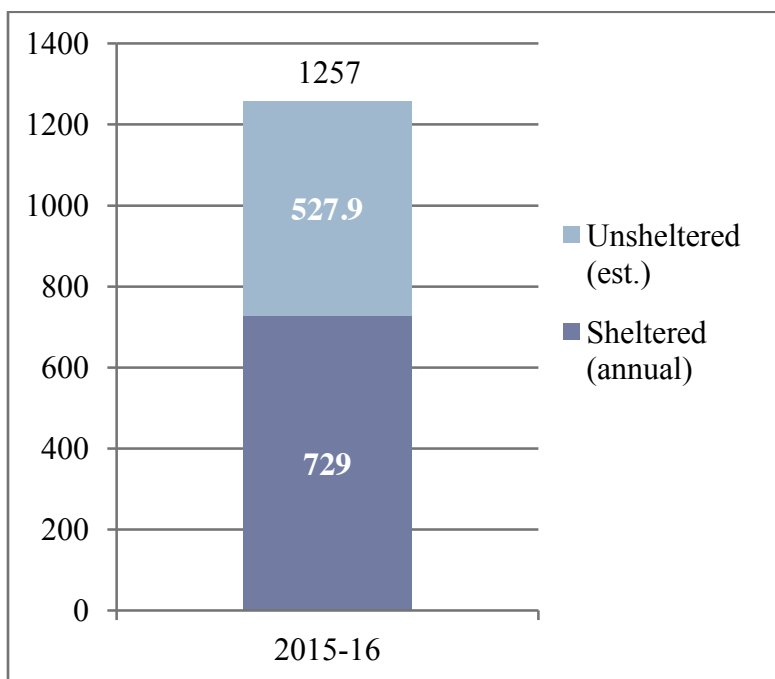
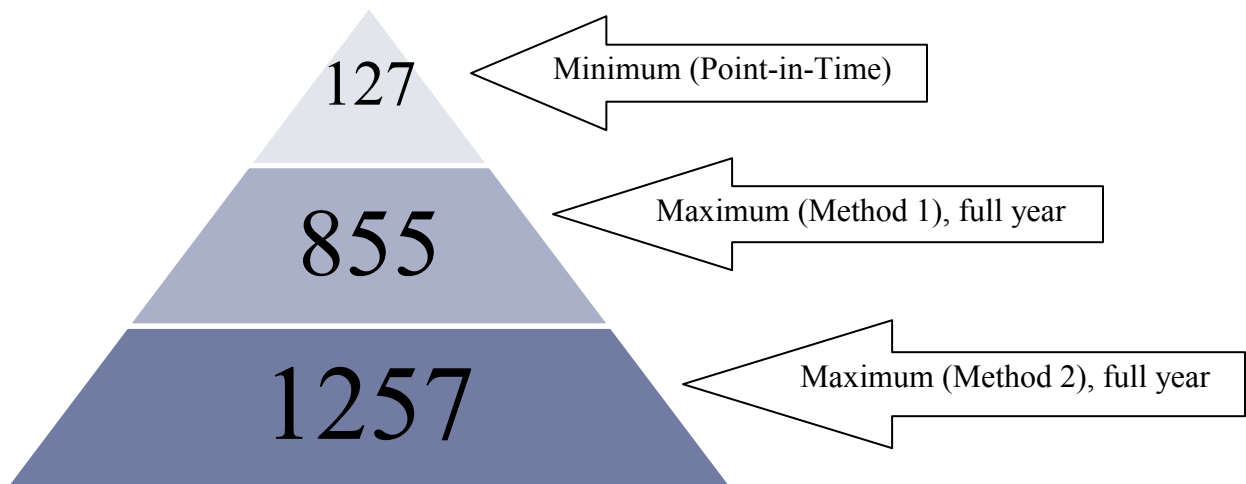


FIGURE 33: NUMBER OF HOMELESS PERSONS, ESTIMATED RANGE, CORVALLIS/BENTON COUNTY, 2015-16



Is 855 a credible maximum?

- Its principal flaw is that it undercounts the unsheltered. It primarily counts sheltered individuals.

Is 1257 a credible maximum?

- It relies on a rough estimate of the unsheltered homeless, but it is probably superior to the method 1 maximum.
- We already know that more than one in three residents of Benton County is cost burdened with respect to housing.
- Sheltered and unsheltered students of Corvallis 509J account for about 1.0% of total enrollment. A maximum of 1257 would mean that about 1.5% of Benton County residents could be homeless at some time during the year.

The latter is a very important factor. Not everyone who becomes homeless stays that way. Unfortunately, we do not have any data on the relative durations of homelessness in our community. Nonetheless, this fact would tend to increase the annual maximum.

Corvallis/Benton County may have more than 1200 homeless persons in a given year. That would be 1.5% of the county's 2015 population.

CONCLUSION: ARE HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS NATIVES?

Only Corvallis Housing First supplied data on the birthplace of their clients to help us answer this question.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, less than half (46%) of Oregon residents are natives of Oregon. Homeless clients of the men's and women's cold weather shelters appear to have birthplaces that are similar to those of Oregon residents as a whole.

Although the data are limited, we find no evidence to support the conclusion that Corvallis homeless residents are largely different than other Oregonians in terms of birthplace.

CONCLUSION: ARE HOMELESS SERVICES A MAGNET?

Neither Oregon as a whole nor Benton County in particular supplies significant levels of shelter for homeless people when compared with other states. To that extent, the magnet effect appears to be illusory.

Compared with 17 other counties in Western Oregon, Benton County ranks third in terms of shelter provided. However, using data from those 18 counties, we found no strong evidence that sheltering the homeless is associated with increased demand for services.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Public decision making requires good information. Budgets can't be built without it. Taxes can't (or shouldn't) be levied without it. Health care quality can't be improved without it. Even the U.S. Constitution contains the requirement for a decennial census because the Founders recognized how important counting the population was for governance.

In this report, the Housing Committee of the League of Women Voters of Corvallis has presented a better set of numbers regarding homelessness in Corvallis/Benton County than those already existing. However, the obstacles we faced were immense.

Why?

- Not every agency/organization is collecting good data
- Agencies are not collecting data the same way
- Data collection is insular to every agency
- The community lacks a central data collection portal for a holistic snapshot of homelessness

To overcome these obstacles, collaboration is essential and can work to reduce duplication of efforts, streamline processes, minimize client “shuffling” from agency to agency, and aid in the creation of solid benchmarks and quantifiable methods to identify outcomes.

To move forward, agencies within Corvallis need to gain a better understanding of who is homeless. Otherwise, we won’t be able to do much more than apply band-aids to a seemingly intractable problem. Without a firm grasp on the numbers, we will continue to be paralyzed. We will continue to fall prey to false narratives and myths such as the magnet effect.

If you can’t measure it, you can’t fix it.

— DJ Patil
First U.S. Chief Data Scientist

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