

Reducing the Revolving Door of Incarceration and Homelessness in the District of Columbia: Population Overlaps

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It is obvious to all who are familiar with the people who find themselves in the District's emergency shelters, on its streets, and in its jail that many times the same people will be in one system one day and the other system the next. This revolving door is not good for the people affected, nor for the systems that see them far too often.

For various reasons having to do with different data systems and confidentiality, until now the District has not been able to do any systematic analysis to identify these multi-system users who spend some time homeless or learn more about them.¹ However, last year, under agreements with the relevant District agencies and The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness, which maintains the District's homeless management information system, Urban Institute researchers obtained the relevant data and conducted the cross-agency matching analysis.

We present our analysis of 42 months of jail data, 24 months of shelter use data, and 8 months of information on Fire and Emergency Medical Services responses to crisis calls.² All data refer to *unique, unduplicated* individuals.

The first big question is—how many people are on this treadmill?

We first look at people appearing in one, two, or all three systems—the jail, FEMS, and shelters/homelessness. Most of the people identified as homeless were found in the HMIS data, but some were identified as homeless in DOC or FEMS records who did not appear in the HMIS data (i.e., they did not use shelters during FY2006-FY2007).

The green circle below represents all the people who appear in the jail data; the blue circle represents all the people who were homeless; the orange circle represents all the people in the FEMS data. Where the circles overlap, you can see the number of people who appear in two or in all three systems.

¹ Recently, some District agencies have been able to compare data systems to identify common clients, but until now the District has not had the ability to use homeless status and use of emergency shelters into the mix.

² Jail data: October 1, 2004 through March 31, 2008; Shelter data: October 1 2005 through September 30, 2007; FEMS data (only Electronic Patient Care Reports that contain full names): January-August 2008.

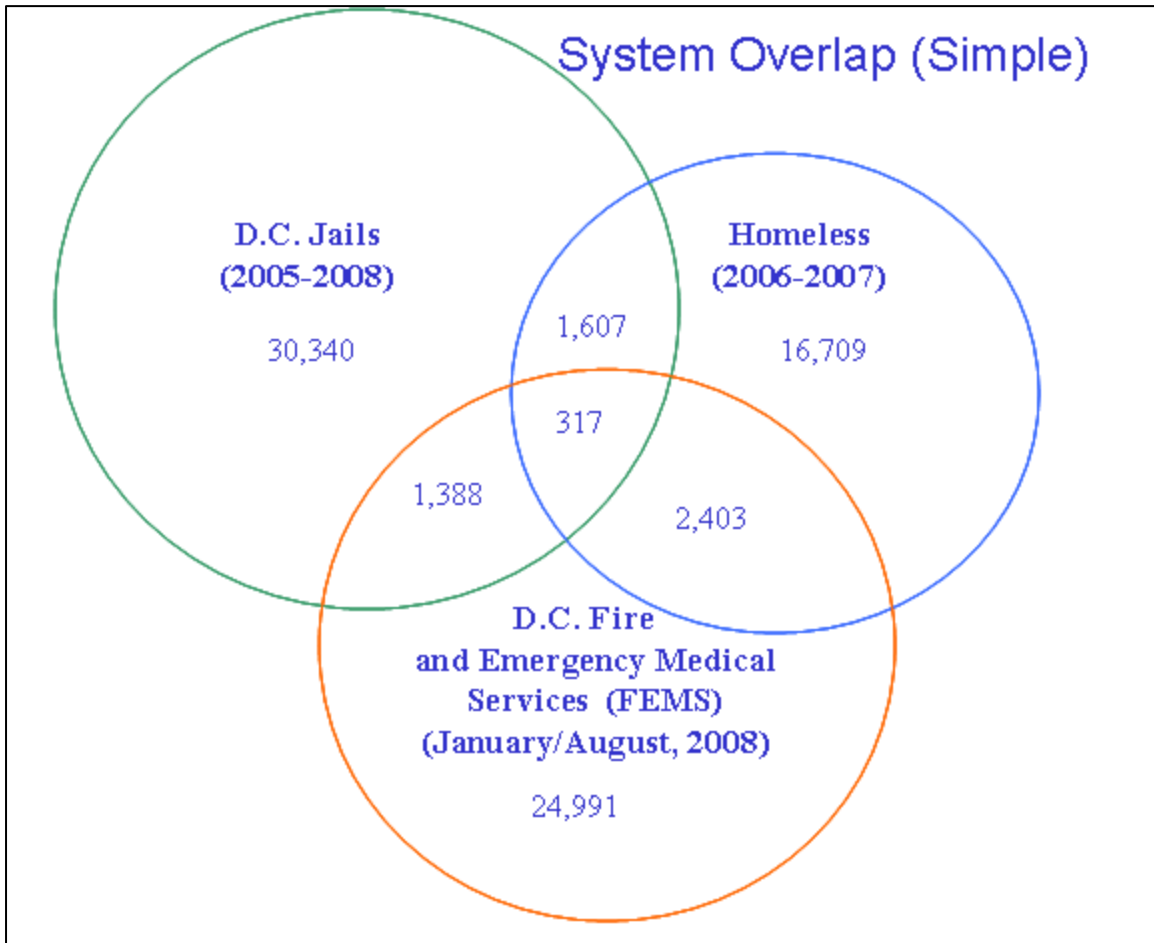
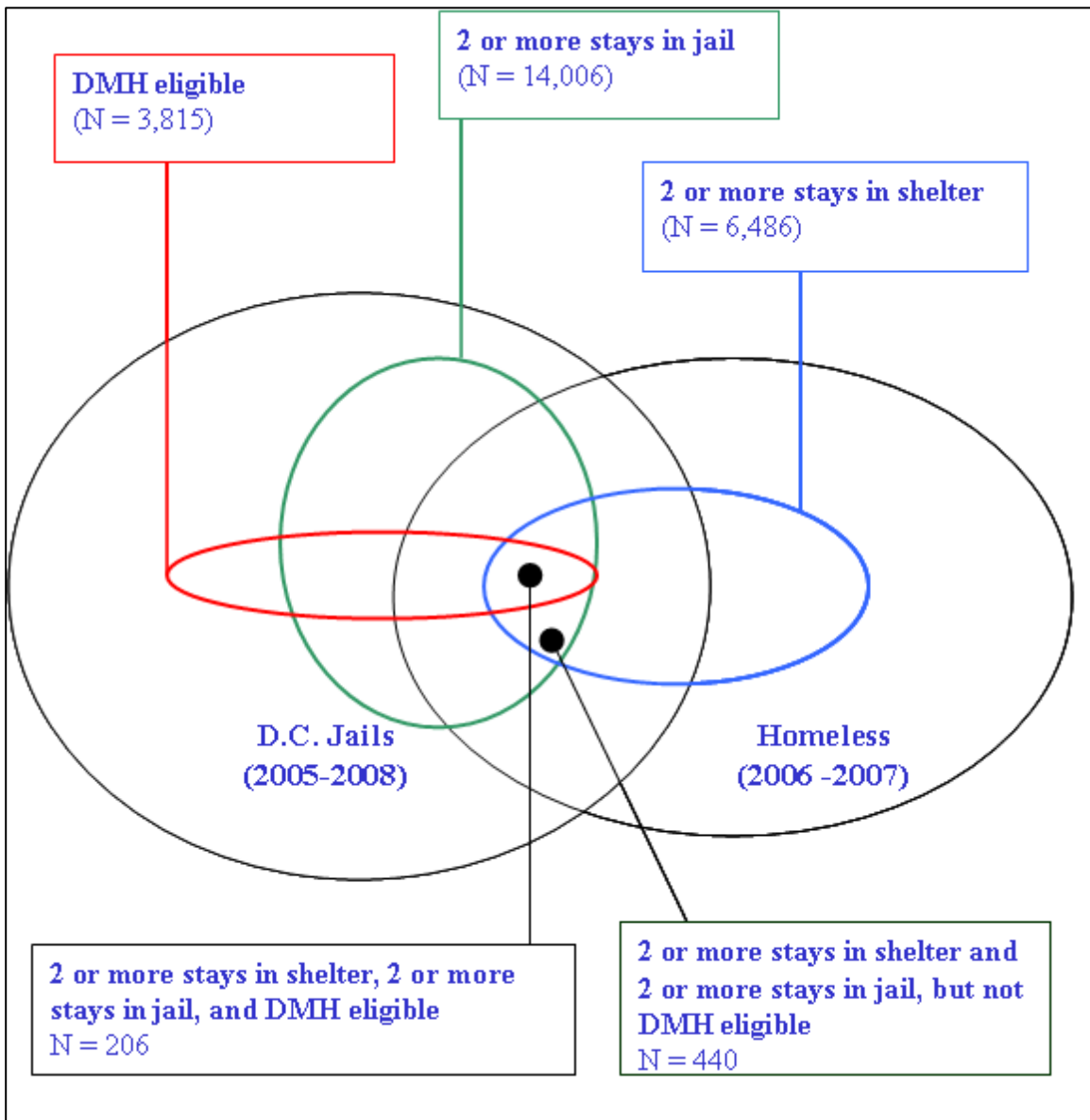


Table 1 gives the same numbers you can see in the circles, in tabular form. It also shows the proportion of all jail users who also use shelters but not FEMS (6%), of all shelter users who also use jails but not FEMS (9%), and so on.

	Jail (DOC data, 42 months)	Shelters (HMIS data, 24 months)	FEMS (8 months)
Total unduplicated individuals	33,652	20,676	28,739
Average/month	801	862	3,592
No overlaps	30,340	16,709	24,991
Overlap with:			
Jail	--	1,924 (9%)	1,705 (6%)
Shelters	1,924 (6%)	--	2,360 (8%)
FEMS	1,705 (4%)	2,360 (11%)	--
Triple overlap	317 (0.9%)	317 (1.5%)	317 (1.1%)
2+ jail, 2+ shelter, and DMH eligible	206 (0.6%)	206 (1.0%)	--

The second big question is—how many people have multiple jail and shelter spells, and how many have one or more seriously disabling conditions such as mental illness?



- About 14,000 people had 2+ stays in jail
- About 6,500 people had 2+ stays in shelter
- About 650 people had 2+ stays in both jail and shelter
- About 3,800 of people with a jail stay were DMH eligible
- 206 of the people with 2+ stays in both jail and shelter were DMH eligible

Implications

- We have found significant overlap among service systems in the District of Columbia and that a small proportion of the jail population that is often homeless when not in jail uses an

- **Cost savings:** Programs targeting these frequent users, such as reentry housing that provides permanent supportive housing (PSH), have the potential to save the District of Columbia money, as they have in numerous other cities across the United States, by reducing use of District jail and emergency services and more efficiently targeting resources.
- **Public safety:** With a focus on identifying and providing reentry housing coupled with services to frequent users with disabilities, the District of Columbia could make a dent in jail recidivism and keep potentially unstable individuals off the streets. These practices would cut jail costs as well as the costs of emergency response agencies such as the police and FEMS.
- **Public health:** Identifying health and mental health issues among frequent users and providing targeted care in jail and shelters, as well as care and support post-release, particularly in the form of PSH, can improve health and help individuals maintain medication regimens. This, in turn, reduces the need for emergency services for the population and frees up the system for higher quality care.
- **PSH Availability:** Currently, all permanent supportive housing (PSH) agencies will accept individuals with criminal records and well over the majority deal with substance abuse, serious mental illnesses, and other disabilities. However, only 2% of the tenants in current PSH units are individuals coming from jail or prison. It seems clear that connections between jails and PSH agencies are needed.

Recommendations

- Working through the Interagency Council, develop or expand collaborative mechanisms to improve the transition from jail to community and avoidance of homelessness for people with serious disabilities.
- Develop a pilot project to provide PSH to a reasonable number of frequent users of jail and shelters who also have a major mental illness or other serious disability. The project should be a collaborative effort of DC government agencies, nonprofit housing and service providers, advocates, and members of the target population.
- For the pilot project, the collaborating agencies will establish a definition of frequent users of District services. Several possibilities are available, including the 206 individuals identified as having an SPMI diagnosis and 2 or more stays in both jail and shelter, or the 50 heaviest users of jail and shelter who resemble those already released to the community from jail, or people meeting some other set of criteria.