Chapter Four: The Research Setting

This study of homelessness in Philadelphia was undertaken in August and September of 1988. The data was collected through structured interviews with men and women who were identified as "homeless" while a research assistant and I lived many of the routines by which homeless people obtain food, shelter, money, and social support. Because of the many unique features of homelessness and its settings, this study does not fit neatly within the usual methods of social scientific research. Therefore, this chapter provides an overview of the network of services used by the homeless in Philadelphia, and explains some of the difficulties that this structure of services posed for the research design. Such an accounting involves a more detailed description than might ordinarily be considered in studies of the homeless because it is necessary for understanding the methodological choices of the research process and the challenges confronting the researchers. The next chapter focuses specifically on the methods of sampling and data collection.

### Identifying The Research Setting & Study Population

In the present study, the first decision of the research project was the identification of a population and residential location(s) in the city of Philadelphia that would be classified as "homeless." Secondly, once identified, a demographic group from within that category of "homeless" had to be chosen as the potential subject population to

narrow the range of factors involved in the study of such a diverse classification of people. Both decisions will be briefly considered in this section.

Recalling one of the important differences between research on "skid row" and the homeless in the 1980's, homelessness today is never referred to as a geographic, residential area of a city such as "skid row," but instead is defined by residence in temporary shelters, welfare hotels and motels in the case of families, or in public places, including parks, and the streets. People in other marginal housing situations, such as those doubled- and tripled-up in overcrowded housing, those in deficient or dilapitated housing, or those in housing that is quite unaffordable, are not usually included in samples of the "homeless," though their housing situations may remain quite unstable and undesirable. From this vantage point, then, the homeless are understood as the "tip of the iceberg," or a "subsegment" in the overall housing-needy population, and the distinction between "homeless" and "homed" is necessarily an arbitrary one. Therefore, accepting that existing research and public discussion focuses on those individuals in shelters, on the streets and in parks as "homeless," this research too will limit itself to those people and situations for subject selection, and exclude more complicated definitional areas like abandoned buildings, overcrowded housing, and dilapitated structures.

A second decision of the research process was to select a demographic group from within the circumstances now qualified as "homeless" that would serve as the study population. On the basis of findings from studies reviewed in the first two chapters, it was decided that this study would focus on single adult men and women, without accompanying children, between the ages of 20 and 45. This group was selected for a number of reasons, some of which may now be obvious to the reader. First, contrary to popular stereotypes, single young adults represent the most common case of

homelessness in Philadelphia and throughout the United States. Second, relative to homeless families and elders, who are increasingly the subjects of sympathetic portrayals of homelessness, young single adults without children are the more stigmatized segment of the homeless population. This stigmatization of the single adult population is evident in public policy, as seen in Pennsylvania, where single adults without children between 18 and 45 years of age are ineligible for any public assistance 9 months out of the year, while families with children are eligible for year-round assistance, though such assistance remains quite meager. Hence, it was decided that this group represented the most interesting potential study population, and the group whose homelessness is frequently not well understood.

Having decided that this study would focus on single adult men and women, without accompanying children, between the ages of 20 and 45, who are living either in shelters, on the streets or in public parks, a sampling strategy was required that would most representatively select from among the designated population, and that would limit the potential biases introduced by the structure of shelter alternatives in the city of Philadelphia. Before describing the specific procedures used to select survey participants, it is necessary to describe in greater detail the structure of the shelter system in Philadelphia to better understand the restrictions that this diverse supply of settings imposed on the eventual sample selection process. For that reason, the following section will detail the administrative structure of the shelters as they existed in the summer of 1988. Since the shelter system changes over time, and since the shelter environment is shaped as much by demand factors as supply, it is important to note both the specific time period under study, and that the following data on the shelters represents their administrative design, not their eventual composition.

### The Emergency Shelter System

# The Administrative Structure of Shelter Alternatives

The shelter system in Philadelphia grew rapidly from 1980 to 1988. As cited previously, the city's Office of Adult Services, the official government authority responsible for sheltering homeless people, processed 7,000 requests for shelter in 1982, and 15,000 in 1983 (ACES, 1985). City officials estimate that nearly 25,000 requests for shelter were processed in 1987 (Mulone, 1988). Since there is likely to be repeated episodes of homelessness, duplications exist in these figures. The city's capacity for *nightly* emergency shelter provision, including both publicly and privately funded beds, grew from under 1,000 beds in 1980 to approximately 5,500 beds in 1988 (Malone, 1988); shelters being those places that either rent beds on a nightly or monthly basis to the City of Philadelphia, or that are subsidized by private charities. A list of the "shelters" that City government funded in 1988 was provided by social work staff at the in-take center of the Office of Adult Services, and has been summarized here in Tables 13 and 14.

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Table 13 shows that 5,102 placements were available through the City in 1988, and an estimated 300 to 500 additional beds open through private charities, unregulated by the City. (Exact figures on the composition of the privately funded shelters is not available.) The 5,102 beds funded by the City are nearly evenly divided between what

are labelled "shelters" and "boarding homes," with a very small number of publicly funded hotel placements. According to the official in charge of homeless services for Philadelphia, the difference between the "shelters" and "boarding homes" is nominal, and better reflects the preferences of different service providers for a more "domestic" or "institutional" name, than is manifest in actual differences in the physical or social structure of the shelter "types" (Malone, 1989). However, as can be seen in Table 13, generally speaking, the "shelters" tend to be much larger in size compared to the "boarding homes." This difference in size is not a standard distinction, however, as there are a couple boarding homes that have a capacity of over 100 beds - larger than the average size of the shelters, just as there are shelters that are very small in size, some serving only five or six persons. In other words, there is no hard and fast distinction in size between what are called "boarding homes" and "shelters," though "boarding homes" are generally smaller. It should also be noted that while city officials maintain that the shelters and boarding homes are increasingly similar in function and design, the labels "boarding home" and "shelter" have different histories. "Shelters" have traditionally provided emergency housing in congregate quarters - with few or no private rooms - for homeless people or people escaping fire or domestic conflict. "Boarding homes," on the other hand, have traditionally provided housing and personal care to poor elderly or disabled people, and have existed in Philadlephia for several decades. Also known as "personal care" facilities, these places have served as poor peoples' nursing, retirement and convalescent homes, and have usually provided nonprofessional nursing care in private or shared rooms to their guests, though in widely divergent living environments. With the growing demand for shelter in the early 1980's, the City of Philadelphia turned to these "board and care" homes for shelter space, and home operators were in many instances eager to accommodate the City, as the

City would pay daily rent for open beds. As a result, homeless people began to be sheltered alongside the usual disabled and elderly clients, creating a diverse, and potentially problematic mixture of people and conditions. This arrangement grew in popularity among boarding home providers, and many entrepreneurs got into the boarding home and "shelter" business when the city was discovered as a steady supply of tenants and money. It is also worth mentioning that many of these smaller boarding homes and shelters could more generally be thought of as "mom and pop" shelter operations, where private citizens are contracted by the city to provide - in their own homes - a form of "adult foster care" to a small number of homeless people. 1

As one might tell from Table 14, there is tremendous variability in the shelter accommodations that are available to homeless men and women. The 5,102 beds contracted by the city in 1988 were located in a total of 162 different sites. The sites vary along a number of dimensions, the most obvious being in size. At least 40 of these "shelters," or 25%, have occupancy for only *one* or *two* persons - the "mom and pop" operations mentioned earlier, although they accounted for less than 3% of the total shelter beds. At the other extreme, however, there were 8 facilities that had more than one-hundred beds, averaging 216 beds in size, with one shelter having as many as 350 beds. More than *one-third* of the city's shelter beds were in these 8 large shelters.

As might be expected, people do not have equal access to the different forms of shelter, as there is quite a bit of segregation by gender, age, family status, and disability status within the shelter system. Shelters can specify the populations that they prefer to serve, and indeed there is a formal and informal selection process going on in the shelters. For example, families are likely to stay in family shelters, in one of the hotels, or in the few shelters for battered women. However, many two-parent families are broken-up by the shelter system since most family shelters won't allow men. And

many families with adult children are forced to divide into the single adult shelters, since family shelters are usually reserved for people with young children. Five sites serve only families, though overall, 14 sites serve a total of 1,301 family members. It should be noted that slightly more than half of the homeless family members are in only 3 sites with an average size of 222 beds per facility.

Unlike other cities, notably New York, Philadelphia does not rely heavily on hotels for sheltering much of its homeless family population. Less than 5% of Philadelphia's homeless are sheltered in hotels. Married couples without children can sometimes receive accommodation in one of two hotels, if room is available. There is no evidence of single persons without accompanying children being placed in hotels, though during research on this project an "unmarried" man and woman admitted to lying about their marital status to gain admission to the hotels, subsequently avoiding the often large and over-crowded shelters.

Perhaps the segregation in the shelter system that is most relevant to the present study is by age. More than half of the shelters, and nearly all of the smaller ones, have age restrictions, excluding persons who are under the age of 35 or 45. For example, all but 2 of those 40 sites that had only one or two beds - the "mom and pop" operations - refused to take people under the age of 45. In contrast, only one of the large- and medium-sized shelters had an age restriction, though three were reserved only for the use of families. Sources also claim that disabled persons, single women without children and elderly persons are more likely to be placed in the smaller facilities, because "security concerns" have led many shelter providers to restrict access to younger men. Moreover, there is a compelling financial motivation for the smaller shelters to accept disabled persons and people over 45, since such persons are more likely to receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI). While the client must be given at least \$30 from

the check every month, or at least \$2 dollars every other day, shelter operators can legally keep the more than \$200 remaining to cover housing costs, even though these same providers will continue to receive the daily \$13 reimbursement for shelter costs from city government. This confiscation of SSI check money is an important deterent for some of the disabled and elderly from going to these smaller sites, as they are fearful of having their checks "stolen."

The most obvious consequence of this age and gender segregation in the shelter system is the concentration of young men and women in the large- and medium-sized facilities of the city. Such people are eligible for the remaining shelter sites usually by virute of not their being restricted from them - in other words, by default. Table 14 shows the distribution of shelter beds available to single men and women, without accompanying children, under 35 years of age. Again, this distribution of single men and women in this table is determined by virtue of their *not* being restricted from these shelter locations. Single people over 35 years of age might also be found in these locations.

Overall, there are 1,784 beds that are available to young men, and 803 beds available to young women (all without children). Together, these beds available to young singles account for the *majority* of the city's available shelter placements. For the men, this usually means accepting accommodations in one of the large shelters (capacity of more than 100). In fact, five large shelters provide *more than half* of the possible placements for men between 18 and 35, averaging 190 beds in size. The women are not as concentrated in large shelters, as only one of the large shelters accepts single women, housing 108 women (13% of this group). Most of the spaces for single women are in medium-sized facilities, that averaged 23 beds in size, and that accounted for 61% of the beds available to single women in 1988. The more limited supply of beds for single women should be noted, as should the unwillingness of most of the facilities to accept

young men, leaving them concentrated in the open-dormitory settings of the large shelters.

Summarizing the gender, age and family status composition of the shelters by bed availability, one notices that young single men have access to the plurality of shelter placements, or 35%, though they are restricted from the majority of shelter facilities, and are concentrated in the largest shelters. Following this group is families, who account for 25% of the total available placements. Like single men, families too are segregated in only a few of the shelter facilities that are relatively large in size, averaging 93 beds. Next comes the group labelled in Table 14 as "other," which are those beds reserved for people over 35 or 45 years of age, and who are frequently disabled or elderly. And finally, there is the single women, who are concentrated in medium-sized facilities, and who are eligible for 16% of the city's shelter beds. Since most homeless families are also headed by young women, a combined total of 41% of the shelter beds are potentially for households headed by women, suggesting a close match with the supply for young men. However, since these distributions, summarized in Table 14, are based on administrative guidelines and not a census of users, they are only an estimate of the population, as the actual population of shelter users is going to be different and changing over time.

Shifts in demand and supply of emergency shelter are going to affect the eventual census of shelter users at any one time, just as social, economic and demographic changes can influence the appearance and management of changing shelter demand. For example, demand for beds among one particular demographic group may grow, and city officials must respond accordingly. Officials can do so by requiring that certain facilities accept persons that they might usually deny. Or the city may develop "overflow" shelters, that can eventually become "permanent" shelters for those demographic

groups whose demand for shelter has grown.<sup>2</sup> Less hospitably, city officials can also deny people shelter, and create or allow sheltering conditions that are widely divergent, including some that are perceived as undesirable, punitive or even unacceptable to those who are designated to use them. Hence officials can potentially diminish the appearance and defuse the determination of demand pressures. Additionally, the demand for emergency shelter can shift up and down according to other public policy changes and to market conditions, such as those that affect the supply of housing. This will be especially true for those whose behavior, characteristics or mere existence has become problematic, or has tested the responsivenenss of both the marketplace and public officials.

# The Shelter Assignment Process.

It is obvious that a selection process goes on in the emergency shelter system, particularly the publicly funded part of that system, which has important implications for sampling. But before describing the sampling design, it will be helpful if the reader considers what the selection process looks like by which people get distributed and assigned to the various publicly funded shelters.

A person seeking emergency shelter from the City must go to the Office of Adult Services' "in-take center" on Cherry Street in center city, where all shelter placements are coordinated. Upon entrance, each person proceeds through an airport-like metal detector, and is frisked by an attending guard and searched for weapons and drugs. People are then separated into men, women and families. Through the metal detector, men must wait in that first lobby, while women and families go through another door into a second waiting area. Both waiting areas, perpendicular to one another, are lined with rows of chairs - very much like one might find at a bus station, and both are facing a common reception room separated from the clients by high walls of

wood framing and plexiglass, resembling a cheap bank-teller's window set-up. Rules regarding smoking, fighting, and in which line to wait, are posted on the badly scratched plexiglass, which is nearly opaque from markings and smudges. There were usually thirty to forty men in the men's area, of which the majority appeared to be under 40 years old, during the summer of 1988. Five to ten men, appearing to be in their 20's, could usually be found against one wall, either slumped over three tables, or lying on the floor - all sleeping. They were presumably waiting to be seen by a case worker, though it is also possible that they were using the in-take center as a "day shelter." The others sitting in the middle of the room were awake and appeared to be waiting to be called on by a case worker, usually busying themselves by reading the newspaper, talking, or sitting quietly. In the same room as the metal detector and main entrance, many of the men are friendly with the guard, who is demographically their peer, and with whom there seems to be a lot of social exchange and joking.

Women, who must walk through the men's area after the metal detector, are often subjected to taunts and jeers from the men. Once in the women's area, the women without children sit along one side of the reception area, while the families sit perpendicular to them, along a wall opposite the wall which is in the men's area - the reception area acting as the center of the facility. The women too were overwhelmingly young adults at the time of this study. Typically there was between 40 and 60 women and family members in this area. One was sometimes struck by the awareness that the clients at Adult Services - as well as much of the staff - were disproportionatlely black Americans (over 90% in the case of clients).

After waiting what is most commonly reported as four hours, but which can take up to seven or eight hours, and even extend overnight, the clients are called one by one to a back room, behind the reception area, which is comprised of a series of office cubicles.

In the cubicles, the clients are interviewed by case workers, and their eligibility for shelter determined. Based on client and case worker descriptions, case workers usually try to dissuade people from entering the shelter system, and ask about available alternatives, including friends and family. But failing that, the case-worker calls around to the various shelter locations and finds a place with an open bed that is willing to accept the client. It is in this process that people get divided out to the shelters based on their characteristics, and their match with the shelters. Some people who have been evicted from a shelter must provide an appropriate excuse or explanation for their behavior before being admitted back into the shelter system. It is not uncommon that clients and case workers disagree, and that fights and arguments ensue. Case workers report having been assaulted, and clients report having been denied their civil rights.

If and when a person is found a shelter opening, that person is given a "puchase of services" form (POS) by the case worker. The POS is the form required by the shelter provider in order that he or she can receive re-imbursement from the City for providing shelter to the homeless person. The POS is either for one night ("one-nighter"), or for one month ("long-term"), the period of time determined by the case worker, the shelter provider, and the client, based on the suitability of the client to the shelter. Usually a person receives a one-nighter for the first couple of days, and will stay on one-nighters until either the person is dissuaded from the shelters and returns to some other "home" environment, or "long-term" status is granted at the shelter the person has been staying, or a "long-term" bed becomes available somewhere else in the shelter system. Within some shelters the "long-term" beds are spatially separate from the "one-nighter" beds, with the "long-term" beds usually reserved for employed people. Some shelters might even have the "long-term" bed areas subdivided by employment status. Long-term guests usually get better food and can sometimes get

better bedding materials. The short-term clients, or "one-nighters," can be shifted around among many different sites before getting a month-long placement, a placement that they could potentially refuse. In fact, some people prefer the greater freedom that comes with the one-nighters, such as having to worry less about curfew, or other infractions that can jeopardize long-term placements. Of course, POS's have to be renewed, monthly or daily, though if one has chosen to do regular one-nighters, one can arrive late at the night in-take center, and be assured of at least a floor or chair spot.

Re-imbursement for the POS is \$13 a day, or up to \$284 per month, per client sheltered. By capping payment at \$284 a month, the city is paying the daily rate for only 21 days, getting 9 "free" days for guarenteeing a month-long ("long-term") placement. This has led many shelter tenants to suspect that shelter staff regularly "discharge" people, or evict them, often on trumped-up charges, because the shelter can then re-rent a bed and continue to receive the \$13 a day payment. If so, a shelter can receive up to \$390 a month for each shelter bed as opposed to the \$284 cap - an enticing incentive for evictions considering that many of the shelters have 50, 100 or even 200 beds. It might me noted that this \$390 a month rent for a shelter cot is more than the median rent for an apartment in the city of Philadelphia.

As already described, the shelters to which clients are assigned are diverse in the environments that they provide, socially and physically. A further description of all of the shelter sites is not possible here. Instead, this section was intended to illustrate what the shelter selection process looks like from my viewpoint as a researcher.

#### A Note on the Unsheltered Homeless

Of course, an undetermined number of people defined as "homeless" in this study never or only occasionally sleep in the shelters, and are eligible for this study because they sleep in other public places, such as parks, subway and train platforms, and other public resting and waiting areas. Such persons are included as potential survey participants, and some brief mention of their "living space" is warranted here.

One of the largest, if not the largest assembly of homeless persons who slept outside at the time of this study could be found in the area including Benjamin Franklin Park, Independence Mall, and the Federal Reserve Bank building. The Federal Reserve Bank is designed with a nearly thirty-foot overhang, creating a deep "porch" that protects from rain and snow. In the summer of 1988, between 60 and 80 persons could be found sleeping nightly under this marble porch, and in the parks across the street. Benjamin Franklin Park, a National Park, is popular as a congregating and resting place in the day for the homeless in this area, though people will usually sleep at the adjacent Federal Reserve Bank. People from the park prefer to sleep at the Federal Reserve to avoid rain, and to be more safe at night than one might be in the hidden areas of the park. Occasional groups of people will have "camp" fires in either Franklin Park or near the Liberty Bell at Independence Mall, even sometimes cooking a meal over an open fire.

Another common nighttime resting place is City Hall, where the building's numerous porticos and doorways provide a modicum of public shelter, in a relatively well-lit environment. From 60 to 80 people were regularly found in this area during the summer of 1988. And both of these locations, the Federal Reserve and City Hall, are visited each evening by a mobile meal unit from "Trevor's Place," a privately operated homeless shelter in the city. The food is considered good by the local standards for charity meals, in large part due to its being a hot meal. Logan Circle, a park in Center City, was another common public place for people to sleep during the day, as was the 30th Street Train Station.

It seemed that many people chose to sleep in fairly public places with good lighting, though this observation is clearly biased by the researchers' ready access to such places.

There is undoubtedly a diverse and numerous range of places for sleeping, perhaps many of which are more secluded, and that are likely to be used by smaller groups of people and even individuals who are alone. The seclusion of such places may make them more safe or more dangerous, depending on the circumstances. Presumably, there is a wide array of arrangements in public and semi-public places in which people find shelter.

In way of guessing the size of this "unsheltered" group, it is very difficult to come up with an accurate estimate, and the figure is likely to change according to the availability of shelter, the quality of shelter alternatives, and even perhaps by seasons of the calendar. At the time of this study, however, there were at least 200 to 300 people who were sleeping in what could be considered "public" spaces in center city, though this must be understood as a conservative estimate. This number does not include the surely much larger number of people living outside in neighborhood areas, who would be considered "homeless" in this study, but who were not sought out in this project. Nor does it include people living in abandoned buildings and dilapidated structures, who did not qualify as "homeless" in this study. But based on that admittedly conservative estimate of 300 persons, one could say that at least 5% of the "homeless" eligible for this study were living "on the streets" at any one time, with a more accurate percentage that is likely to be higher.

#### Conclusion

This chapter reported on the demographic and institutional contexts in which this research project was conducted. By defining the study population and the structure of the shelter system, readers will better understand the necessary methologogical choices of the research process. These institutional circumstances of homelessness deserve careful attention because there is a selection process which defines social location among the homeless, and those social locations must be accounted for in the research design.

While the shelter system deserves significant study itself as a powerful structuring institution among the homeless, this chapter was intended to outline the relevant dimensions of that system for the study reported in this dissertation.