



NYC Department of Homeless Services

## Emerging Trends in Client Demographics Policy & Planning

### Introduction

The New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) was established in 1993 to address the problem of homelessness. Since its inception, and especially over the past two decades, the de-institutionalization of the mentally ill and the burgeoning phenomenon of homeless families have changed the picture of homelessness in New York City. At present, DHS directly runs or administers under contract more than 200 shelters serving thousands of people each day.

Policymakers and advocates define two main categories of homeless people: single adults and families. The single adult system is utilized by three sets of users: chronic, episodic, and transitional short-term users. Chronic and episodic use is often associated with psychiatric disability, substance abuse and prison history, while transitional short-term use is often associated with temporary unemployment (Culhane, 1998).

The family system provides services to two distinct populations: parents (predominantly single mothers) with children, and two or more related adults (married or domestically partnered couples, parents with adult children, and adult siblings). Research on homeless families has typically focused on the demographic and individual characteristics of the stereotypical single mother in her late twenties with two children. There is a lack of research on how diverse sub-populations of families may use the shelter system in different ways.

### Purpose

The DHS Division of Policy and Planning undertook a review of the demographics of the homeless population residing in the DHS shelter system between 1988 and 2002. The objective of this report is to provide an important perspective on the demographics of the homeless population and a summary of trends during this period. The review examined the ethnicity, age, gender, and family composition of the family and single adult shelter populations.

### Data Limitations

The data for this report are from DHS management and information systems: the adult homeless system (SCIMS) and the family homeless system (HOMES). In some cases these data were used simply to inform capacity management, and standard quality assurance procedures were not in place. In some cases, there is a lack of consistency in reporting data and data are either missing or incomplete. In these cases, the report will indicate the weakness of the data. Despite these data limitations, this comprehensive study provides an important perspective on the changing demographics of the homeless population and a summary of emerging trends in recent years.

## Finding: The Shelter Population Fluctuates and Increases

### Families

During the 1980's and 1990's, families with children have been the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in New York City. The number of homeless families, after a slight decline beginning in 1995, has dramatically increased in the past two years (see Figure 1). The dramatic increase of this population from 1999 to 2002 is reflected across the board, in the total number of families (44% increase), the number of adult families (94.9% increase), the total number of adults in families (50.9% increase), and the number of children in families (48% increase).

These numbers are unduplicated, meaning they represent unique families and not repeat users.

### Single Adults

Similar to the family shelter population, the single adult shelter population, while falling and leveling during the 1990's, has increased in the last two years. Beginning in the early 1990's, there was a significant decrease in the number

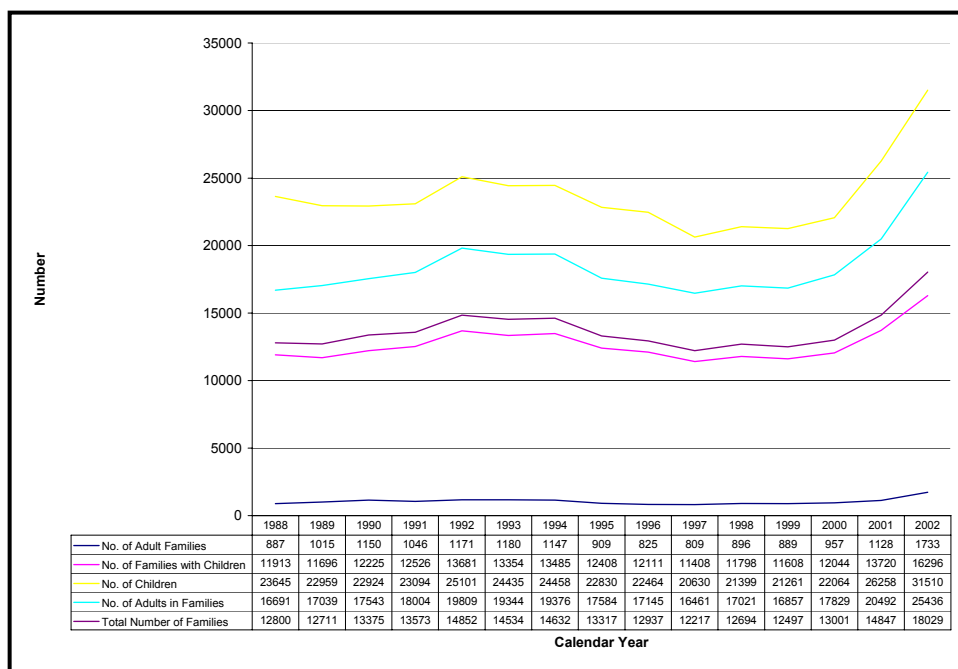


Figure 1: Average family shelter census for calendar years 1988-2002.

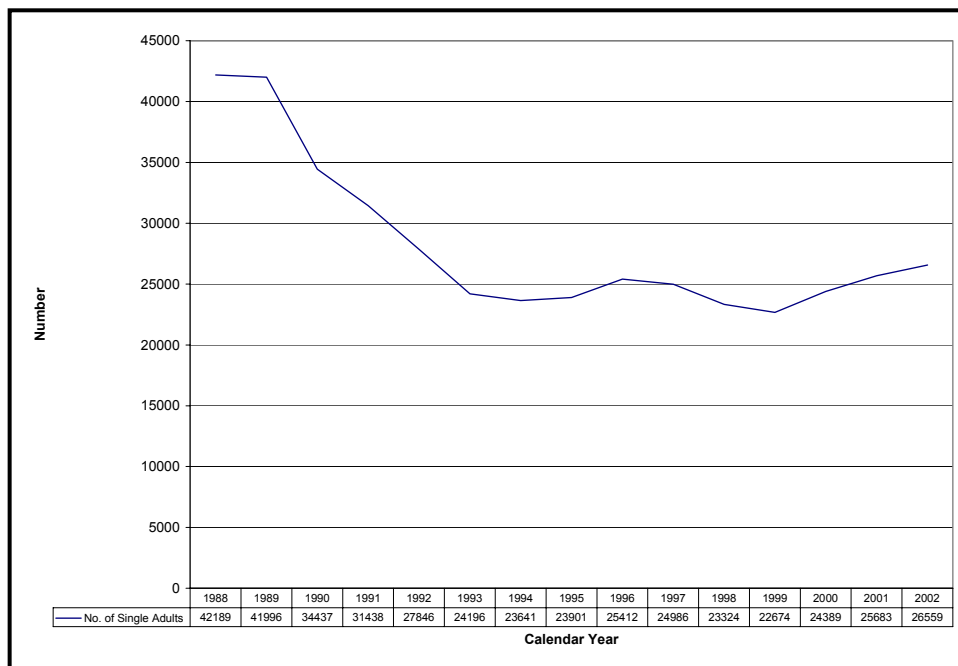


Figure 2: Average single adult shelter census for calendar years 1988-2002.

of single adults in shelter (see Figure 2). The downward trend in shelter use ended in 1993. The sheltered population was relatively stable until 2000, when it began to rise. Since then, the total number of single adults has slowly yet steadily increased. Again, these numbers are unduplicated, meaning they represent unique individuals and not repeat users.

**Finding: Distribution of Race and Ethnicity in the Shelter Population is Significantly Different from the General Population in New York City**

Families

The family shelter population is largely of minority race. The limitation of this data set is problematic since the actual description of these categories on intake forms was not inclusive of all ethnic groups, and in practice the data are recorded only for the head of household. Taking these limitations into account, the distribution of race has been relatively stable since 1988.

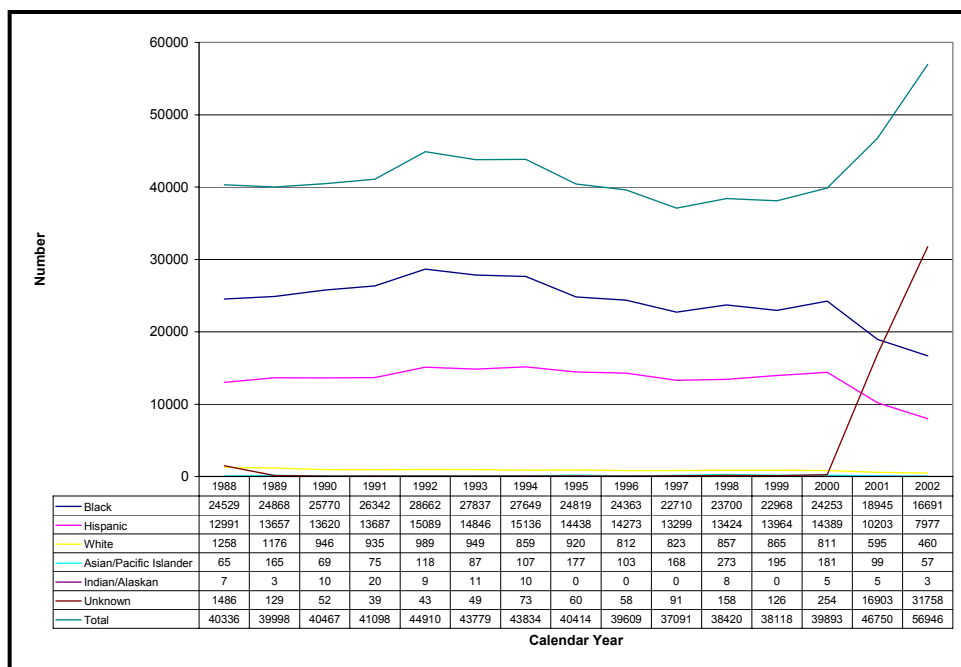


Figure 3: Race and ethnicity of the family shelter population for calendar years 1988-2002.

Figure 3 illustrates that the racial and ethnic characteristics of the family shelter population are relatively constant over the study period, approximately 60-65% African-American, 30-35% Hispanic, less than 5% White, and very small percentages of Asians and Native Americans. For some racial/ethnic groups, this distribution is in stark contrast to that of the general population in New York City. According to the 2000 Census, 24% of New Yorkers are African-American, 27% are Hispanic, 35% are White, 10% are Asian/Pacific Islanders, and less than 1% are Native American.

Note that while the African-American and Hispanic populations appear to be declining, the number of people of unknown race has grown dramatically. It is unlikely that the racial breakdowns have changed much; this graph shows their stability relative to each other over time. Rather, race may not be recorded properly during the intake process. It should also be noted that there is no choice for ‘mixed-race,’ so it is possible that in these cases, the shelter intake employee chooses to identify the client’s race as ‘unknown.’

Single Adults

While the race and ethnicity data for the single adult shelter population are not as problematic as in the family shelter system, the adult population data are limited due to under-reporting in SCIMS. Similar to the family shelter population, the race/ethnicity of the single adult shelter population is

largely minority. The demographic characteristics of this population have dramatically changed since the middle of the twentieth century, when this population was dominated by white unattached males. Figure 4 illustrates that the characteristics of this group are relatively constant from 1988-2002, with

approximately 60% African American, 25% Hispanic, 15% White, and very small percentages of Asians and Native Americans. As in the family shelter population, for some racial/ethnic groups, this distribution is in stark contrast to that of the general population in New York City. Again, according to the 2000 Census, 24% of New Yorkers are African-American, 27% are Hispanic, 35% are White, 10% are Asian/Pacific Islanders, and less than 1% are Native American.

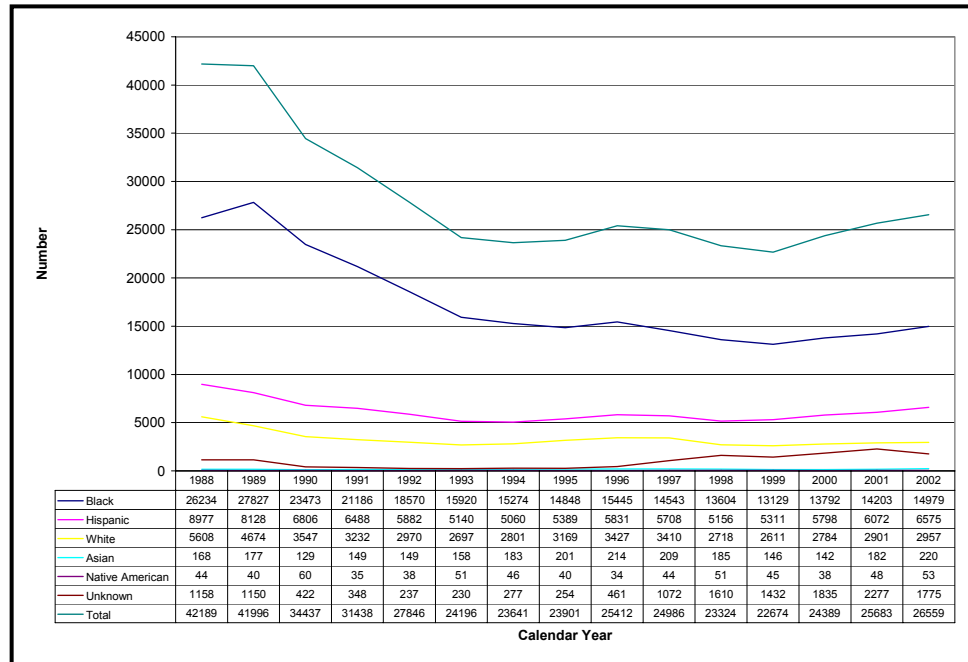


Figure 4: Race and ethnicity of the single adult shelter population for calendar years 1988-2002.

## Finding: The Shelter Population is Aging

### Families

For the majority of the study period, roughly 60% of the heads of household in the family shelter system were between 18 and 29 years old (see Figure 5). This segment of the population declined to approximately 55% in 2002. The population of those over 40 years of age

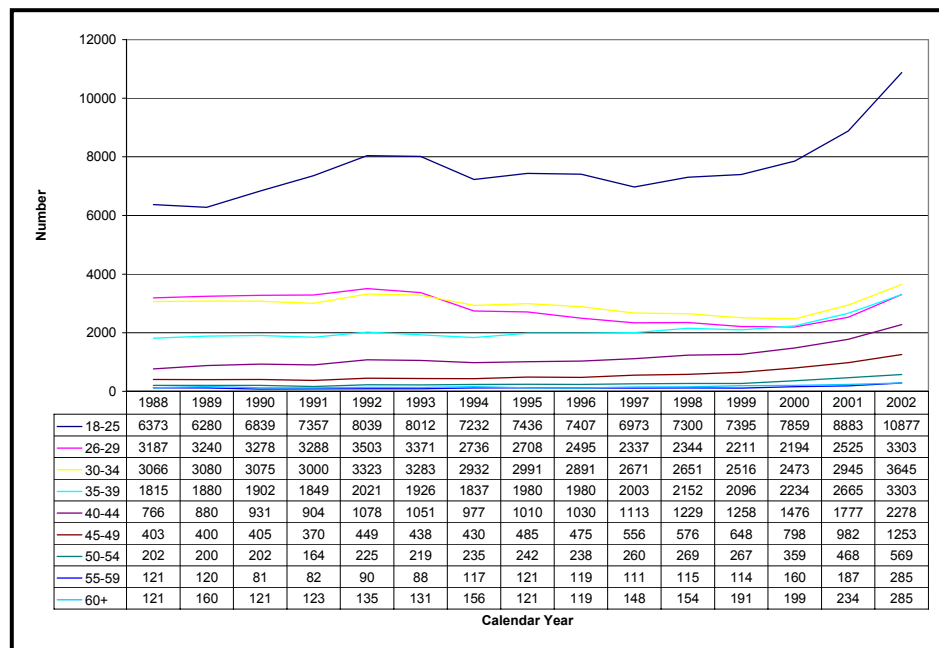


Figure 5: Age of adults in the family shelter system for calendar years 1988-2002.

has increased from 10% of the population in 1988 to almost 20% in 2002. This increase may be attributed in part to a slight increase in the number of individuals in adult families and in part to the fact that people are aging within the system. The age of children in the DHS family shelter population has increased slightly in recent years. As Figure 6 illustrates, there has been an increase in the number of children between the ages of 6 and 11 years. This increase from approximately 25% of the population in 1998 to more than 30% in 2002 has significant implications for service delivery.

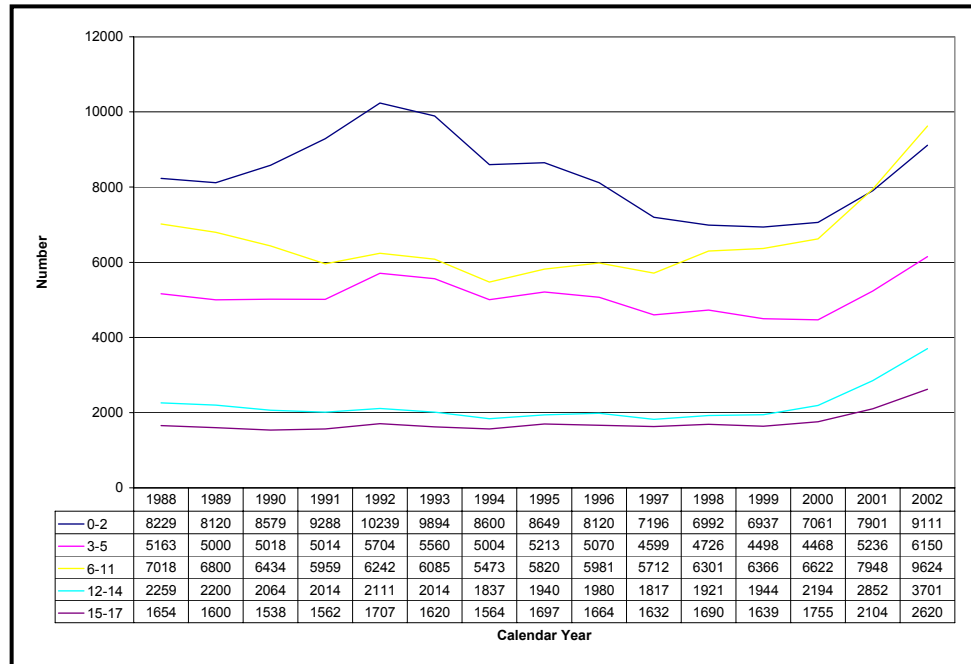


Figure 6: Age of children in the family shelter system for calendar years 1988-2002.

The family shelter system is now accommodating far more school-aged children than ever before. Families with children ranging in age from infancy to two years old have decreased from almost 40% in 1993 to less than 30% in 2002. In general, children in families are older in recent years compared to children in the shelter system in the early 1990's.

### Single Adults

Similar to families, the age of adults in the single adult shelter system has increased since 1988 (see Figure 7). Single adults in the system are an average of five years older than they were in 1988. Since 1999, individuals over the age of 40 have grown to constitute 53% of the total population. In 1988 that same population constituted less than 30% of the total population.

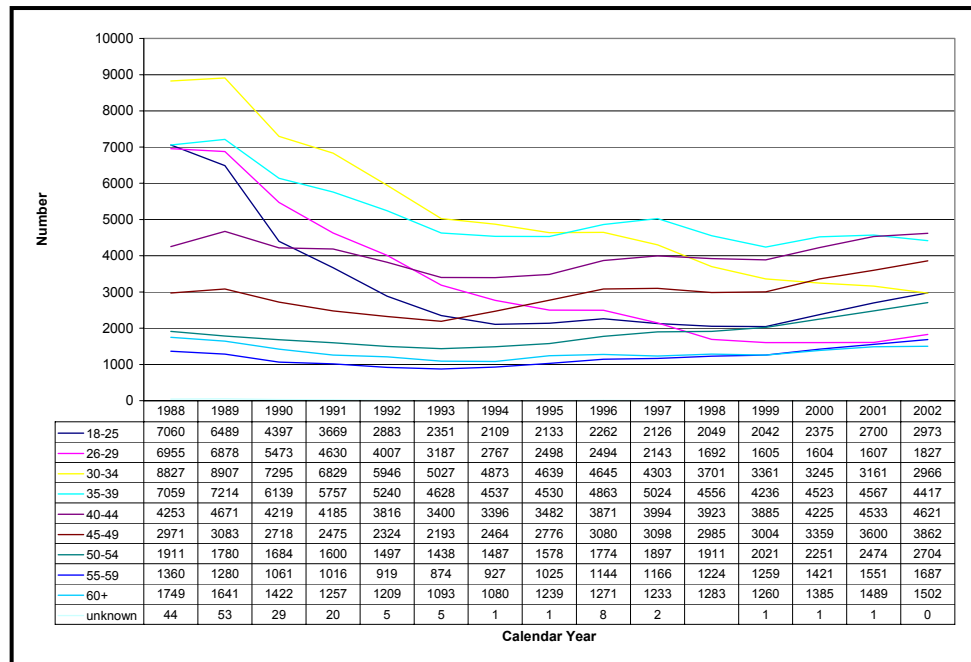


Figure 7: Age of single adults in shelter for calendar years 1988-2002.

Interestingly, the age 26-34 cohort has shrunk while the age 18-25 cohort has grown in recent years.

## Finding: Family Composition Remains Relatively Stable

The composition of families in shelter has remained relatively stable, with approximately 70% of the population comprised of single parent households, 20% of the families with two parent households, and less than 10% adult families (married or domestically partnered couples, parents with adult children, and adult siblings). As Figure 8 illustrates, there has been a slight and recent growth of two-parent families. However, this growth is less dramatic relative to the total population growth than the growth of single parent households and adult families.

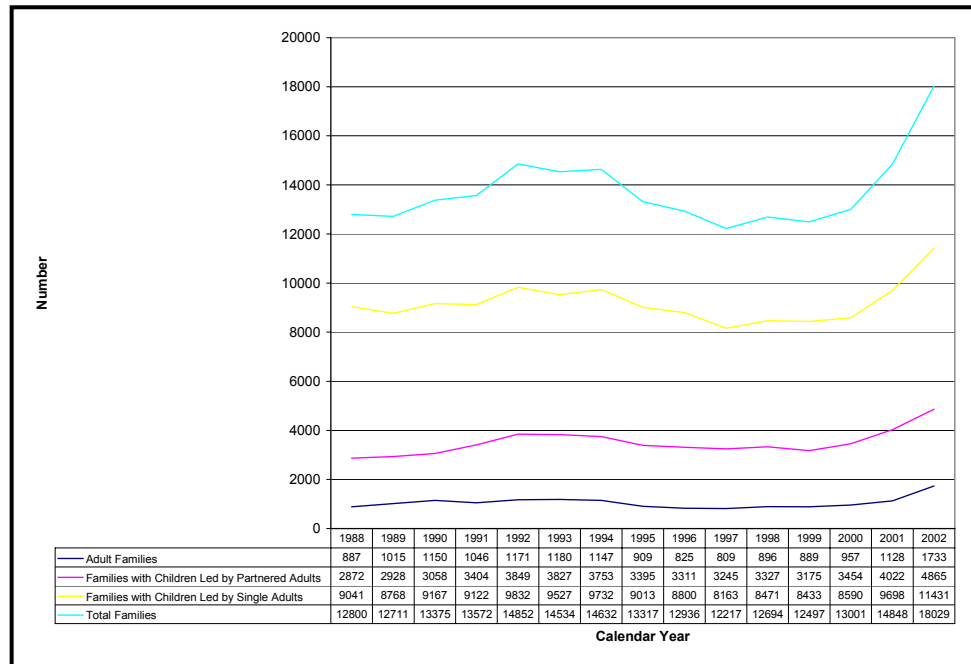


Figure 8: Family composition in the shelter system for calendar years 1988-2002.

The number of children in the shelter system has increased (see Figure 9). This is largely due, however, to an increase in the number of families rather than an increase in the number of children per family. Families with one or two children have consistently made up about 75% of the family population. In 2002 there was a slight increase in families with three or more children.

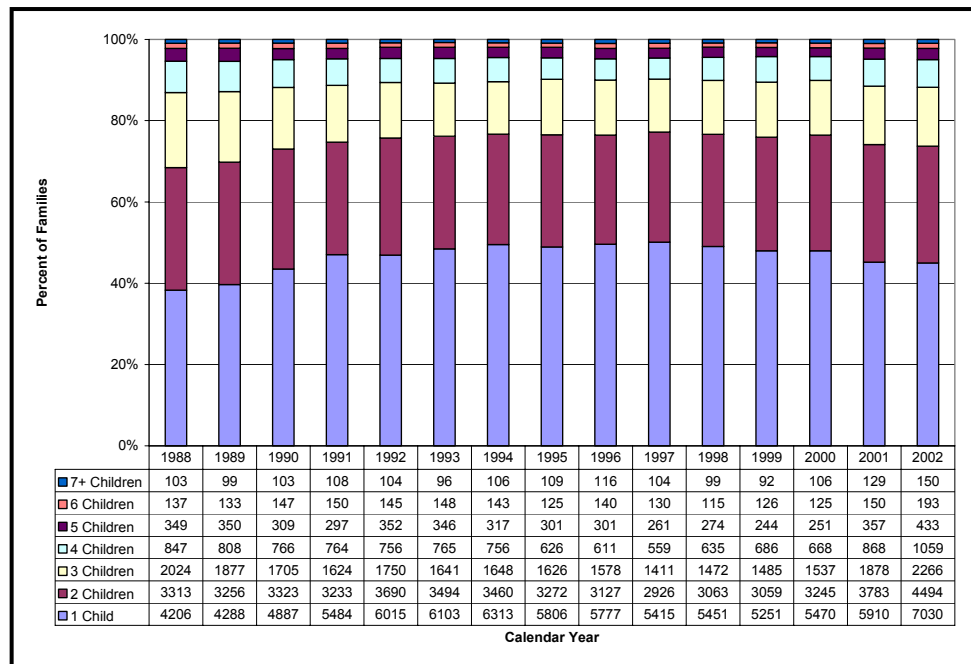


Figure 9: Number of children per family in the shelter system for calendar years 1988-2002.

## Finding: Gender Distribution Remains Relatively Constant

### Families

Among the adults in the family system, nearly 70% are female (see Figure 10). The male population has grown as a percent of the total by more than 5% since 1996.

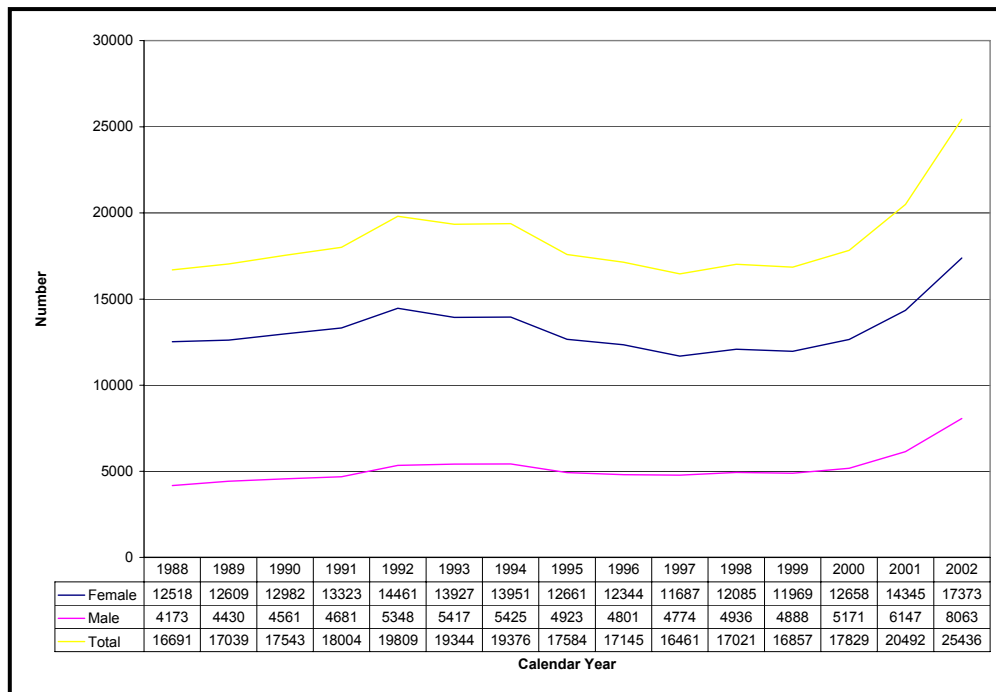


Figure 10: Gender of individuals in families in the shelter system for calendar years 1988-2002.

### Single Adults

The adult shelter system is 76.8% male and 23.2% female (see Figure 11). Since 1996, the number of women entering the homeless system has increased by 5.6% as a percent of the total and by 37.6% in real numbers.

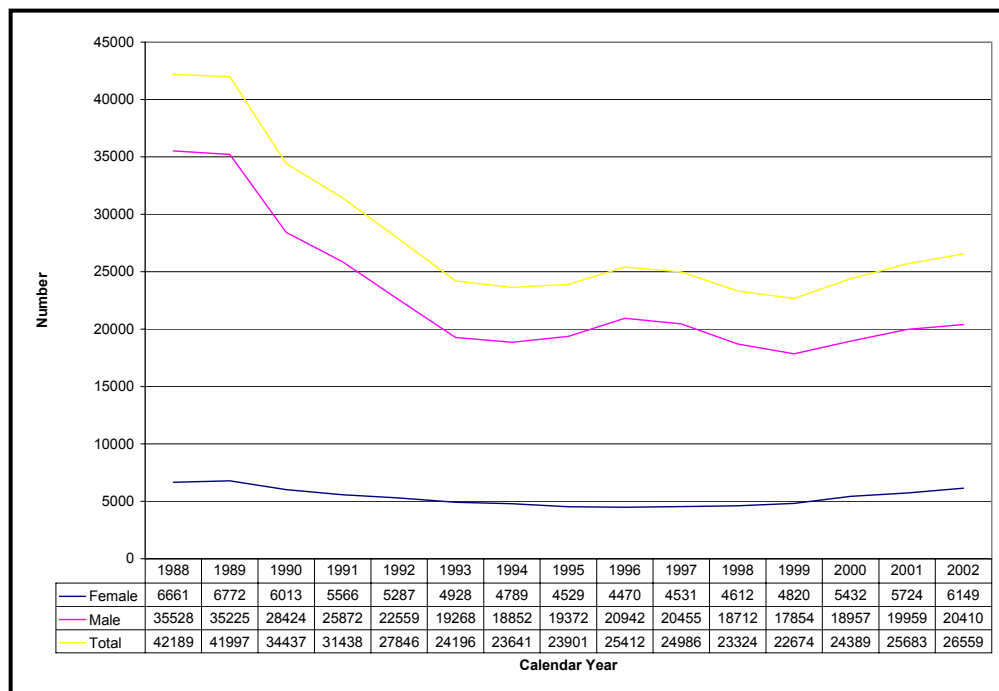


Figure 11: Gender of single adults in shelter for calendar years 1988-2002.

## Summary

The changing demographics of the shelter population in New York City may have important implications for homelessness prevention efforts. By conducting further research into the causes of the significant increases in the single adult and family shelter populations, as well as some of the significant demographic changes, DHS will be able to tailor prevention efforts to serve populations that are at an imminent risk of homelessness.

This report is part of the ongoing efforts of the Division of Policy and Planning to provide information about DHS shelter systems to others in city government, the community of providers and advocates who work with the homeless, and the general public. Top priorities of the DHS Strategic Plan include improving data collection, analyzing data to ensure that the agency is meeting the needs of clients in our system, and using both to facilitate housing permanency for homeless adults and families.

#### References

Culhane, D.P. (1998). Predictors of Exit and Reentry of Shelter Use in New York City. Unpublished Paper. New York City Department of Homeless Services.