



# **The Growing Challenge of Family Homelessness**

## Homeless Assistance for Families in Massachusetts: Trends in Use FY2008-FY2016

*Prepared by*  
Westat

*for*

The Boston  
Foundation 

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*Editor:* Sandy Kendall, The Boston Foundation

*Designer:* Kate Canfield, Canfield Design

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**Debra J. Rog, Ph.D., Westat**

**Kathryn A. Henderson, Ph.D., Westat**

**Andrew L. Greer, Ph.D., Westat**

**Kathryn M. Kulbicki, M.A., M.S.A., Westat**

**Linda Weinreb, M.D., University of Massachusetts Medical School**

The authors acknowledge and appreciate the assistance provided by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) in accessing administrative data and conducting some analyses. They also acknowledge the assistance provided by Westat colleagues Yong Lee, Clara Wagner, Beth Halayko and Emily Abbruzzi.



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Dear Friends,

First, I want to express the Boston Foundation's deep gratitude to the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development for its partnership in making the valuable data in this report available to the authors.

Our goal in publishing this material is to establish a common set of facts about how homeless families flow through the Commonwealth's emergency assistance system. We hope the information and insights in these pages will inform the thinking of policy makers and strengthen the work of those serving the homeless today, while helping to plan for the future.

Included here are answers to some of the questions all of us have about which families are in shelters longer than others, how families move between different types of shelters, what kinds of assistance they receive and how often they return to the system. This report also compares Massachusetts to other places, such as Seattle/King County, where changes in the approach to homelessness may be decreasing the length of stays in shelters and transitional housing.

While most of this report focuses on numbers and percentages, it is impossible to read it without thinking about the people behind the statistics: the families, especially the children, whose heartbreaking struggles with homelessness are influencing virtually everything about their lives and their futures. We have known for some time that homelessness has a detrimental impact on children's development, and that makes it a critical issue for the Boston Foundation and the Commonwealth as a whole.

Children, who are among the most vulnerable members of our society, make up 60 percent of the 13,000 people who are experiencing family homelessness on any given day in Massachusetts—and how we serve them and their parents is a reflection not only of our systems and institutions, but our character as a community.

Since its earliest days, the Boston Foundation has made people living in poverty its primary area of concern—from immigrants in the early 1900s who were coping with dangerously overcrowded neighborhoods, to those suffering through the Great Depression, to the children and adults of today who are being denied the opportunity to achieve, or even attempt to achieve, the American dream.

We hope this report and the dialogue that follows its release will contribute to addressing the growing challenge of family homelessness, a condition that no residents of a community as wealthy and resourceful as ours should ever have to face.

Sincerely,

Paul S. Grogan  
President and CEO  
The Boston Foundation

# Foreword

Efforts are under way in Massachusetts to prevent and address homelessness so that fewer families experience it and those that do can regain housing stability more quickly. Data on the size, nature, flow and experiences of the families receiving homeless assistance over recent years can help the state of Massachusetts assess whether its efforts are effective and can guide future decisions. With support from the Boston Foundation and in cooperation with the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), Westat, an independent research organization, has assembled, merged and analyzed several longitudinal data systems to provide a greater understanding of the families receiving shelter through Massachusetts's Emergency Assistance (EA) program and accessing other homeless assistance. The analyses have specifically focused on changes in the EA population's size, characteristics and use of shelter over the past nine years. In addition, it examines the extent to which families served in the EA system receive other homeless program supports, such as prevention, diversion and time-limited housing assistance, and how their supports compare to those supports provided to families that have not received EA. Finally, we examine how trends in shelter use by families in Massachusetts compare and contrast with trends nationally and in selected communities.

The purpose of this report, the first of its type supported by the Boston Foundation, is to offer policy makers, practitioners and the general public an understanding of the growth and composition of the homeless family population and provide a baseline against which to measure ongoing change and progress. It was commissioned shortly after the current gubernatorial administration took the reins, with the hope that a baseline can be built upon over time as new efforts are made to stem the tide of family homelessness. Moreover, the report highlights the gaps in data that continue to challenge the system's ability to fully understand the families it serves, their needs and the extent to which they are addressed and families' outcomes following assistance.



# Executive Summary

On any given night in Massachusetts, more than 13,000 individuals in families experience homelessness, approximately 60% of them children (HUD, 2016). Living in shelters and hotel/motels disrupts the lives of both adults and children, affects family stability and makes it difficult for families to maintain daily routines and productive lives.

The homeless assistance system in Massachusetts, like many homeless delivery systems across the nation, is evolving its practices, moving from interventions that manage homelessness to those that work to reduce and eliminate it. Homeless delivery systems are examining the mix of housing, services and supports in order to determine how to prevent homelessness when possible and decrease its duration when it becomes inevitable. Having data on trends in the dynamics of use of homeless assistance can help inform program and policy decisions.

## Families Receiving Emergency Assistance

Since FY2008, more than 33,000 family households have received shelter through the Massachusetts Emergency Assistance (EA) program, accounting for more than 100,000 individuals. The number of families receiving EA has more than doubled in the past nine years, an increase that is among the highest in the nation. Families also comprise more than half of the Commonwealth's homeless population, making it one of only two states (the other being New York) in which families comprise more than 50% of the shelter population.

Families receiving EA have become homeless for various reasons, most commonly due to a health and safety concern such as living in a place not suitable for human habitation. Families served in Massachusetts look demographically like families served across the country: On average, a family staying in a Massachusetts shelter is headed by a female about 30 years old with one or two children. A little more than half (56%) of the families have been white, 37% have been African American

and 40% have been Hispanic. Race and ethnicity have varied somewhat by region, with Boston having the lowest percentage of families identified as white (35%), and the western part of the state having the highest percentage of white families (78%). The western part of the state also serves the highest percentage of Hispanic families (57%).

The demographic profile of families has remained largely consistent over time with respect to age of the head of household, and racial and ethnic composition. Family size, however, consistently increases over time. Families entering shelter in FY2008 averaged 2.59 persons, increasing to 3.23 in FY2016. Increase in family size is largely due to a steady increase in the percentage of families with a spouse or partner, from 8% in 2008 to more than double that percentage at 19% in 2016.

### Key Study Findings

- Since FY2008, Massachusetts has experienced one of the largest increases in family homelessness in the country.
- Recent data suggest that the number of new entrants to the system as well as returns to shelter may be declining.
- Length of stay in shelter, however, continues to increase, with recent estimates averaging nearly a year state-wide and longer in Boston.
- Families struggling the most in both exiting shelter and staying outside the system tend to be larger in size and headed by a female who is African American and/or Hispanic.
- About half of the families in shelter also receive other homeless and housing assistance, including RAFT, HomeBASE and other assistance.

## Emergency Assistance New Entrants, Returns, Length of Stay and Patterns of Use

Although the number of families receiving EA has increased since FY2008, data for the past two years show a dip in the number of new entrants into the system. Decreases in new entrants coincide with the use of diversion and other homeless assistance programs that offer both prevention and stabilization supports and with changes in eligibility criteria. It is not clear which or if any of these factors account for the decrease, however.

Families' length of stay in shelter continues to increase over time across the state. Families that entered the system in FY2008 stayed an average of 247 days (approximately eight months); for families that entered in FY2013, the average length of stay increased by more than 100 days to 360 days—nearly a year. Controlling for the year they enter the system, families with longer stays are more likely to exit from scattered-site shelter or co-shelter, and from Boston and the northern part of the state. Longer stayers also are more likely to be larger families with a head of household who is younger, black, Hispanic and female. Families with shorter lengths of stay are more likely to exit from hotels and from central Massachusetts.

The number of families returning to the system within three years has decreased over time from 18% for the FY2008 cohort to 13% for the FY2013 cohort. On average, returning families came back 788 days after their first episode. Compared to families with only one episode, returning families have longer lengths of cumulative stays and are more likely to be larger and to have heads of household who are younger, black, Hispanic and female. In addition, returning families, compared to families with a single shelter stay, are more likely to have stayed in a congregate shelter in their first episode of the system and to be from the southern part of the state (as opposed to the central part).

When we examine length of shelter stay as well as returns, we find that families fall into one of four patterns of shelter use: “temporary stayers,” repeat users, long-stayers and a group that is both long-stayers and repeat users. Temporary stayers (though still staying an average of six months in shelter) make up the largest group, with two-thirds of those who enter shelter falling into this category. The type of shelter and region from which a family exits distinguishes the different patterns.

## Other Homeless Assistance

Massachusetts has several homeless assistance programs in addition to shelter. These programs are designed to prevent homelessness, divert families from homelessness who might otherwise enter shelter, or provide assistance to stabilize families once they leave shelter and are in housing. Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) provides prevention assistance and HomeBASE can be used for both diversion and stabilization after receiving EA.

Between FY2008 and FY2016, more than 31,000 families in Massachusetts received assistance from one of these programs (or predecessor programs). The majority of these families (54%) did not enter shelter but instead received RAFT prevention assistance (37%) or HomeBASE diversion assistance (65%).

Prevention assistance provides financial support and services to aid households at risk of homelessness in preserving their current housing situation when they experience some instability. Diversion assistance involves exploring alternatives to entering shelter for EA-eligible households and includes up to 12 months of housing stabilization assistance.

The remaining 46% of families that received assistance through these programs also received EA shelter (accounting for about half of the EA-sheltered family population). HomeBASE has been the most frequent program received with almost equal numbers of families receiving diversion assistance and rehousing assistance.

EA-sheltered families, on average, received nearly double the assistance (an average of 13.2 disbursements<sup>1</sup> of assistance and \$9,677 spent) provided through these homeless assistance programs than families who did not have an EA shelter stay (who received an average of 7.4 disbursements of assistance and \$5,905 spent). EA-sheltered families most likely to receive HomeBASE, RAFT or other assistance are headed by individuals who are older, black, Hispanic and female; have larger families; have longer stays in shelter; and exit from co-shelters. Among EA-sheltered families, these additional resources appear to be targeted largely to families who are having difficulty exiting shelter, as EA families receiving the additional assistance had longer shelter stays (318 days) than those not receiving the assistance (231 days).

## How Massachusetts Trends Compare with Other Areas

Trends in Massachusetts (particularly Boston) are compared with the nation as a whole and with two selected communities, New York City and Seattle, to offer additional insights. The housing markets in New York City and Seattle, as in Boston, are competitive and expensive and have few vacancies. New York City, like Boston, has seen fluctuations in the number of new entrants to shelter over time, and a steady increase in the length of shelter stays. Both communities have long average lengths of stay, over 14 months in New York City and approaching a year in Boston. The bottleneck in New York City is attributed in part to decreases in subsidized housing; in Boston, limited subsidies, along with housing market factors, are explanations for the long average length of stay. In Seattle/King County, however, average length of stay has decreased (although the data are only available for three years). Seattle's decrease is likely due to multiple factors, including initiatives instituted since 2012 to rapidly rehouse families and decrease reliance on transitional housing.

The right to shelter in New York City and Boston may account for some of the overall increase in new entrants over the nine-year time period examined, but is unlikely to explain increases in length of stay. The comparative analysis with all three communities highlights the importance of trying to reduce length of stay by targeting housing resources earlier in a family's shelter stay.

## What the New Analyses Tell Us and What More Do We Need to Know

Homelessness among families has increased in Massachusetts at a rate much higher than the national average. The number of new entrants, though showing promising decreases in the past two years, has more than doubled over time, and length of stay in the system continues to climb. Returns to shelter have been declining, but are still near 13%.

Findings suggest that focusing additional resources on larger families and those headed by younger females of color and Hispanic origin may be instrumental in helping them leave shelter earlier *and* avoid returning. Although these families appear to be a priority for HomeBASE assistance, it is not clear when they are offered the assistance. Targeting assistance to families earlier in shelter stays may help to decrease time spent in shelter. Areas to emphasize in order to help families leave shelter more quickly and with a greater chance of stability might include:

1. understanding the resources a family has and how they might be built upon (such as helping families save money while in shelter);
2. assessing job skills and how a family might benefit from job training; and
3. offering them a more intensive housing location assistance.

The analyses produced for this report provide greater insight into the population served through EA and the dynamics of shelter use over time. There are, however, continuing gaps in the completeness and quality of the available datasets that limit the ability to fully understand these trends and how assistance is targeted. Further data on the income and employment status of families in EA, for example, would provide an understanding of how well additional resources are being targeted. In addition, more complete information on the demographics of non-EA families that receive other types of assistance would offer a clearer picture of the families using these resources. Finally, having more complete data on the timing of RAFT and HomeBASE assistance would allow a finer grained examination of how these resources are being used in conjunction with shelter to stabilize families and help them exit the shelter system.



## SECTION I:

# Introduction and Background

Family homelessness continues to be an all too common occurrence in Massachusetts. On a given night in January 2016, 4,381 families totaling 13,174 individuals stayed in one or another of the Bay State's shelters or hotel/motels, accounting for nearly 60% of the state's homeless population (HUD, 2016). This percentage of families among the homeless population is considerably higher than the national percentage of 35%. Moreover, Massachusetts is one of only two states (the other being New York) in which families comprise more than 50% of its shelter population.

Family homelessness not only dominates the homeless landscape in the Commonwealth, but has grown dramatically in recent years. Based on "Point-in-Time" (PIT) counts between FY2008 and FY2016, the number of families in shelter increased 93%, making Massachusetts one of five states (including the District of Columbia) with the largest increases in family homelessness (HUD, 2016). This increase is in stark contrast to the overall decline nationally in the number of families experiencing homelessness. Although recent PIT data indicate that the number of individuals in families in shelter in Massachusetts decreased by 11% (from 14,728 to 13,158) between FY2015 and FY2016, the size of the population continues to be daunting.

Research has shown that families most vulnerable to homelessness are typically young families who lack the resources to compete in tight housing markets (Rog and Buckner, 2007). While poor, domiciled families

experience many of the struggles homeless families experience, certain challenges, such as family separations, are greater for homeless families. Living in shelters and hotel/motels, however, disrupts the lives of both adults and children, affects family stability and makes it difficult for families to maintain daily routines and productive lives. Homelessness can have an additional detrimental effect on children's health, education and overall welfare, especially in the short run; if a family can be rehoused, these effects can dissipate over time. Efforts are under way in Massachusetts to prevent and address homelessness so that fewer families experience it and those that do can regain housing stability more quickly. Data on the size, nature and flow of the population receiving different types of homeless assistance over time can help assess whether these efforts have traction in tackling the homelessness problem and guide future decisions. PIT counts provide an understanding of the number of homeless families receiving shelter, but cannot provide insights into the characteristics of families receiving assistance nor the dynamics of shelter use.

With support from the Boston Foundation and in cooperation with the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), Westat analyzed data from several datasets on homeless assistance programs in Massachusetts to provide a greater understanding of the size and composition of the population of families receiving Emergency Assistance (EA) and other homeless assistance over the last nine years. Although these datasets have their own inaccuracies and flaws, as described in the methodology section below, they provide a more detailed understanding of the population and their experiences than the traditional PIT counts.

The purpose of this report is to offer policy makers, practitioners and the general public an understanding of the changes in the growth and composition of the homeless family population over time and the nature of families' experiences in the EA system. This understanding can help to inform state policy makers and provide a baseline against which to measure ongoing change and progress as new efforts are made to stem the tide of family homelessness. Moreover, the report highlights

PIT counts are annual national counts of homeless persons conducted on a single night in January by a set of volunteers canvassing within a specified geographic area to identify individuals living on the streets and other outdoor areas as well as in shelters. PIT counts are directed by Continuums of Care, regional or local planning bodies that coordinate housing and services funding for homeless families and individuals.

gaps in the data that limit complete understanding of the needs of families served and the extent to which the system is meeting those needs. We underscore these gaps and suggest ways in which they may be filled or remedied through data quality improvements and data sharing across agencies.

## Methodology

Three major sets of questions guide our analyses of the data:

1. What are the trends in the population of families served through the EA program with respect to numbers served, demographic characteristics and family composition, and tenure in and repeat use of the system?
2. To what extent do families who receive EA also receive assistance through other homeless assistance programs?
3. How do the trends in homelessness in Massachusetts, especially Greater Boston, compare with those nationally and in other selected cities in the country?

Prior to analyzing the datasets, documents and published literature were reviewed to provide an understanding of the different Massachusetts homeless assistance programs and their history as well as relevant aspects of the state and local (Boston) context, especially related to poverty and housing; the national scope of family homelessness; and homeless assistance programs and the scope of family homelessness in two comparison areas, New York City and Seattle/King County. In addition, officials in DHCD were interviewed to understand the current configuration of the state system as well as ongoing issues and challenges.

Exhibit 1 provides information on the datasets analyzed for the study, including the years data were available, the sets of variables provided and the analyses conducted. The datasets include Massachusetts DHCD Emergency Assistance data on all families receiving EA, and the DHCD Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program data, a merged dataset providing data on all families receiving one or more other assistance programs: the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) program providing prevention services; HomeBASE, a program providing stabilization services to eligible shelter families as well as to eligible

families diverted from homelessness; and earlier diversion and rehousing programs (now discontinued).

Analyses, as described in Exhibit 1, include both descriptive and inferential analyses. Descriptive analyses include both frequency and bivariate analyses. Inferential analyses, designed to explain differences in outcome variables such as length of stay in shelter, include several multivariate analyses, such as ordinary least squares regression, logistic regression, survival analysis and cluster analysis. Data were examined for the population as a whole as well as by year and by region.<sup>3</sup> Regression analyses were used to examine the relationship between length of EA stay and receipt of other assistance with a host of family and context variables. Survival analysis was used to examine factors that predict returns to shelter. Cluster analyses were used to understand patterns of EA use among homeless families based on the number of homeless episodes they experienced and the number of cumulative days spent in EA. (See Exhibit 1 for definitions of analyses.)

Several aspects of the data should be considered when reviewing the findings. First, the quality of DHCD Emergency Assistance data varied over time as well as for specific variables. For example, the EA system defines a gap of fewer than 90 days between entry dates in different EA programs as a single EA episode (and not a repeat to the system) because there can be missing data on exit dates from programs and because a family can only access EA again after 12 months have passed. Additionally, some data elements, such as relationship of family members to the head of household, were insufficient for analysis before FY2012. Other items, particularly those that are not required Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) elements for the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), such as reasons for homelessness and type of exit assistance received, were only available for a limited period of time. The database on RAFT, HomeBASE and other assistance programs does not include demographic or family characteristics or region where the assistance is provided so we are unable to examine the relationship of those variables to receipt of assistance. Additionally, we only have aggregate measures of amount of assistance received (both in terms of frequency and dollars) so we cannot examine changes in these variables over time.

## Datasets Analyzed and Types of Analyses Performed

### Datasets and Variables

(Dates indicate the years for which the data are available)

#### DHCD Emergency Assistance Data (FY2008–2016)

- EA enrollment start and end dates
- Demographic characteristics (age, race/ethnicity, gender)
- Family size and composition
- Type of EA shelter (congregate, scattered-site, co-shelter, hotel/motel)
- Region of shelter (West, Central, North, Boston, South)
- Reasons for homelessness (limited to new entrants FY2014–2016)
- Type of exit assistance (limited to families exiting between FY2014–2016)  
[Table 10 lists the types available]

#### DHCD Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program Data (FY2008–2016)

- Date assistance received
- Type and number of instances of assistance received
- Amount of financial assistance received

### Current Context

Historically, when increases in family homelessness have been experienced across the country, they have been accompanied by increases in poverty rates and income inequality, and shortages of affordable housing (Grant, Gracy, Goldsmith, Shapiro and Redlener, 2013). This has held true for the last decade in Massachusetts, especially in Greater Boston, where these same conditions in poverty, income inequality and lack of affordable housing have been ever-present and have been offered as explanations for the persistence and growth in family homelessness. Despite having an economy

### Types of Analyses Performed

#### Descriptive Analyses

**Frequency distribution**—examines the distribution of all variables for range, measures of central tendency (average, median), outliers and extent to which there are missing data.

**Bivariate analysis**—examines the distribution of key variables by region and over time, using chi-squares and t-tests to test for significant differences. Used to examine changes over time in the size and characteristics of the population, reasons for homelessness, length of stay and receipt of other types of assistance.

#### Inferential Multivariate Analyses

**Ordinary least squares regression**—examines the influence of key variables on differences in continuous or interval measures (such as length of stay), controlling for the potential influence of other key variables included in the model.

**Logistic regression**—examines the influence of key variables on differences in dichotomous variables (such as whether a service was received or not), controlling for the potential influence of other key variables included in the model.

**Survival analysis**—examines the factors that predict a variable that relates to time, such as time to return to shelter. This approach models (1) the probability of a return to shelter, and (2) how long it takes to return.

**Cluster analysis**—examines whether there were one or more distinct patterns with a particular set of variables, such as patterns of EA use among homeless families based on the number of homeless episodes they experienced and the number of cumulative days spent in EA.

that has grown faster than that of the nation as a whole (Bluestone, Tumber, Huessy and Davis, 2016; Bluestone, Tumber, Lee, Modestino, Costello and Davis, 2015), the Greater Boston area has experienced a somewhat commensurate growth in the poverty rate, particularly when the rate is adjusted for the cost of living in the area. The adjusted data indicate that 16.2% of families are living below the poverty level. This figure, taken together with the 26.3% of families that have incomes above \$150,000, indicates that income inequality in the area is among the highest in the United States (Bluestone et al., 2016). The real average wage has increased, but it has done so unequally, with higher wage earners experiencing increases while lower wage workers actually experienced a decline.

Poor families are also priced out of the housing market. A family with a single parent minimum wage earner makes \$1,333 a month, mismatched with the \$1,454 fair market rent for a 2-bedroom apartment in Greater Boston (Tittmann, 2014) and even further out of line with the more typical median rents of \$1,500 to \$1,700 in the least expensive neighborhoods (Center for Social Policy, 2015). Moreover, with a current vacancy rate of 1.1% in Greater Boston considerably below the U.S. average of 4.1%, the housing market continues to tighten and be out of reach for many poor and even middle-income families. Finally, the stock of affordable housing as well as funding to subsidize housing to increase its affordability is insufficient (Tittmann, 2014). Data on permits for new housing in Boston indicate that the percentage of affordable new units has decreased substantially since 1996 to a low of 18% for the latest period available (2011–2016) (Bluestone et al., 2016). Housing for middle-income families is also falling short of production targets, further increasing the competition for lower cost housing. Finally, HUD housing programs, though serving low-income households, tend to serve older households and those living above the poverty level (Bluestone et al., 2016). A majority of those living in poverty in four of the five counties in Boston are not served by HUD housing programs despite the fact that a third of the HUD subsidized housing in Boston serves families with children (Bluestone et al., 2016).

These contextual challenges have made it difficult to move the needle on the homelessness crisis in Massachusetts and especially in Greater Boston. As discussed in Section IV, the challenges are similar to those in other large metropolitan areas experiencing economic growth. Finding ways of keeping families from entering the homeless system as well as helping those already in

shelter exit to and sustain permanent housing is a goal and challenge nationally. In Massachusetts, homelessness is a priority of the current state administration, with Governor Charlie Baker highlighting the reduction of family homelessness as a particular goal, especially for families placed in hotels and motels (Miller, 2016). In addition, the governor has revived the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness (ICHH) to lead the administration's efforts to end homelessness, working with key state agencies (Massachusetts Governor's Office, 2015). With respect to family homelessness, the ICHH is charged with recommending improvements to ensure that programs are aimed at preventing and addressing homelessness effectively, developing strategic policy reforms and facilitating coordination among various state agencies and stakeholders, and supporting the implementation of a newly established End Family Homelessness Fund at the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS).

## Report Organization

Framed by the background and context presented in this section, the remainder of this report is as follows:

- Section II provides an overview of the EA program and describes trends in:
  - the size and composition of the family shelter population
  - length of shelter stay and factors that predict differences in the trends
  - returns to shelter and factors that predict them
  - distinct patterns of shelter use
- Section III describes:
  - other homeless assistance programs in the state and the trends in their use over time
  - the extent to which EA families receive assistance from these programs
  - how EA families' receipt of assistance of these programs compares to the receipt by non-EA families
  - other types of exit assistance available
- Section IV compares the trends in family homelessness in Massachusetts, especially in Greater Boston, with trends in two comparison communities and the nation as a whole.
- Section V summarizes the findings, discusses their implications, and highlights the gaps in knowledge that remain and steps that can be taken to fill them.
- Appendix A includes a glossary of key terms.



## SECTION II.

# Emergency Assistance in Massachusetts (FY2008–FY2016)

In this section, we briefly describe the Emergency Assistance (EA) Program operated by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) and examine trends in the size and nature of the population of families served through the program. We then discuss the dynamics of families' use of the system over the nine-year period between FY2008 and FY2016.

### Background on Emergency Assistance in Massachusetts

Massachusetts' EA system is noted as one of the most comprehensive shelter systems in the country for homeless families (Culhane and Bryne, 2010). Legislation established in 1983 (Chapter 450 of the Acts of 1983) and signed by then Governor Michael Dukakis led to an expansion of a state emergency shelter system that ensures a "right to shelter" for eligible families (Schon and Rein, 1994). The legislation also included other homelessness prevention programs to assist low-income tenants. The legislation's intent was to have the system provide enough shelter beds so that no one needed to remain on the street; consequently, the system at times has had to accommodate increases in the number of families needing a place to stay, requiring either an expansion of shelter capacity or the use of hotels and motels.

Emergency Assistance (EA) is a program operated by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development to provide homeless families with children access to emergency shelter and help finding permanent housing. When shelter is not available, families are placed in a hotel or motel and may move to a shelter when there is a vacancy.

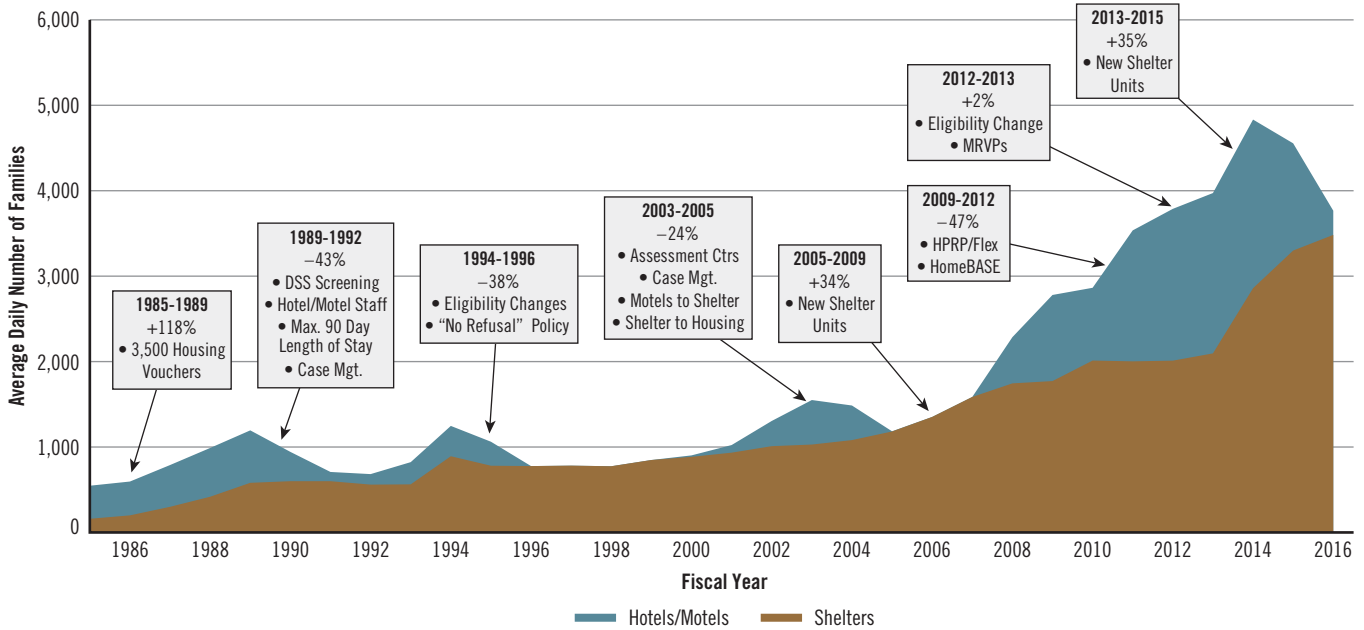
While multiple states may expand their shelter capacity to meet demand, only two other jurisdictions in the country, New York City and the District of Columbia, have right to shelter mandates that require them to expand capacity to meet demand. These three areas represent three of the five states with the largest increases in Point-in-Time (PIT) counts of family homelessness since 2007. PIT counts document families almost exclusively in shelters, as few families are found homeless on the streets or in other literally homeless areas during the counts; most family counts, therefore, are measures of the capacity of the shelter systems. Systems that have a right to shelter expand their shelter capacity to accommodate families in need, and consequently, have a greater proportion of families in their homeless population than other systems (HUD, 2016).

The right to shelter mandate in Massachusetts has historically had supporters and detractors. Supporters believe that the mandate provides needed supports and an important safety net for families, and they frame it as an emergency child welfare program to help children be safe and off the streets (e.g., Bourquin and Hirsch, 2013). There are concerns among these advocates, however, that the 2012 updates to the EA eligibility criteria have weakened this safety net (see discussion on page 17). Others have voiced concern that the assurance of shelter, along with the perceived prospects of receiving vouchers for those who stay in the shelter, have provided perverse incentives, encouraging some families to become homeless in order to have access to housing subsidies (Schon and Rein, 1994; Culhane and Byrne, 2010).

**Figure 1**, developed by DHCD, displays the number of families receiving EA assistance between FY1985 and FY2016, split for shelter and hotels/motels separately. Overlaid on the chart are key policy changes that help to explain some of the fluctuations over time. Spikes in shelter use occurred with the addition of new shelter units, such as in FY2013 through FY2015. Hotel and motel use also fluctuated with policy changes and grew between FY2007 and FY2014; however, the rate of use of hotel/motels has declined between FY2014 and

FIGURE 1

### Number of Families Receiving Emergency Assistance in Shelters and Hotels/Motels, FY1985–2016<sup>1</sup>



1. Computed using the monthly caseload for September of each fiscal year. Source: Data provided by DHCD.

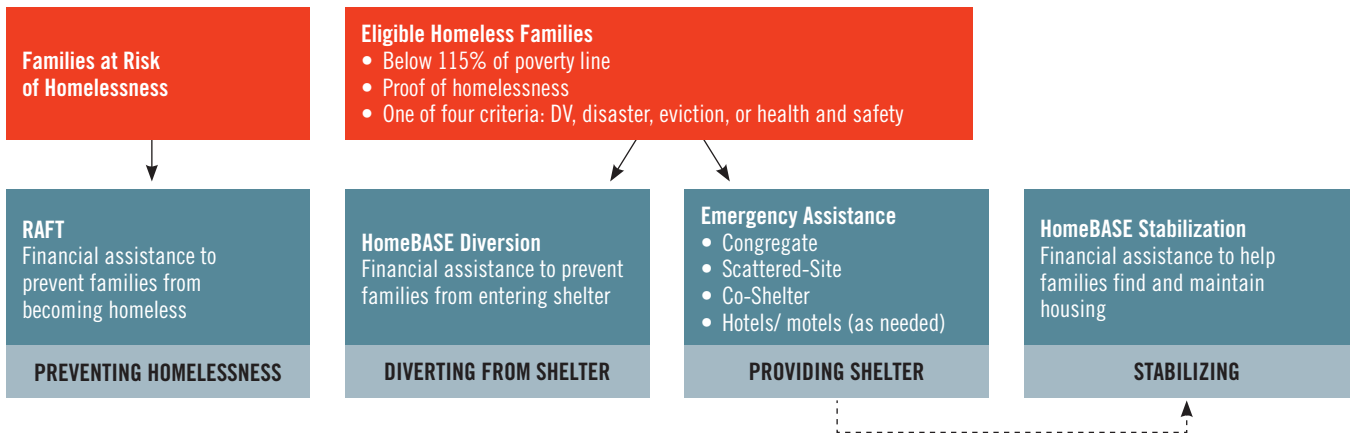
FY2016. Overall, changes in eligibility requirements for families as well as the introduction of prevention and other homeless assistance programs to reduce EA usage (Center for Social Policy, 2015) have also contributed to some of the fluctuations, although the overall pattern has been one of increase over time.

### Current Configuration of Emergency Assistance and Other Homeless Services

In this section, we describe the EA program and in Section III we describe the other homeless assistance programs available (as displayed in **Figure 2**). Massachusetts operates homeless services at the state level (Massachusetts Emergency Management System, 2013).

FIGURE 2

### Configuration of Homeless Services



Source: Documents and interviews with DHCD officials

Shelter is provided by 52 nonprofit providers across the state through EA contracts with the Massachusetts DHCD. Four types of shelters are available across the state: congregate shelters, scattered-site shelters, co-shelters and hotels/motels (see **Figure 3**). Numbers of units are current as of December 2016.

*Congregate shelter*, composing one third of the units (n=1,249) provides families with their own room and shared bathroom, kitchen and living area. These shelters are staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

*Scattered-site shelters*, currently the most common option in the state with 38% of the units (n=1,471), are apartments in the community rented by the state. Families in scattered-site shelters receive services either through an offsite case manager visiting a family’s home or by a family going to a central office.

*Co-shelter* is the newest of the shelter options, with 25% of the shelter stock (n=943) now involving this option. Co-shelter involves two to three families sharing an apartment, with each family having its own bedroom and sharing the remainder of the apartment. Some apartments are staffed; others are not.

*Hotels and motels*, as noted, are used as an overflow system when shelter capacity is filled. DHCD does not contract for a specific number of hotel and motel units, but rather uses the number necessary to meet the current demand. In December 2016, 180 of the

families (5%) receiving EA were housed in a hotel or motel. Hotels/motels provide each family with its own room and wraparound services, although 24-hour case management services are not available.

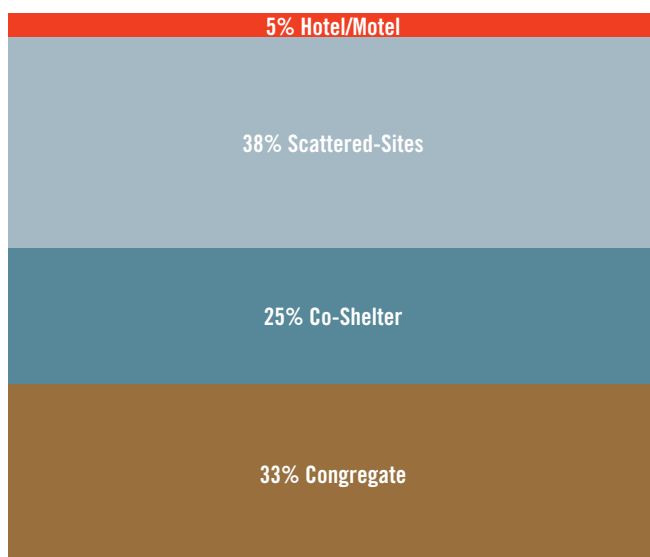
## Current EA Eligibility

The Massachusetts homeless system is required to provide shelter to all families who are deemed eligible for EA, subject to appropriations as noted. Eligibility requirements have varied over time, with eligibility prior to FY2012 criticized by some as too broad (Culhane and Byrne, 2010) and the narrower current eligibility requirements considered too restrictive by others (Bourquin and Hirsch, 2013), who say they screen out many families who are in need of shelter and cannot compete in the tight housing market. The current eligibility requirements, passed in FY2012, indicate that families must fall below 115% of the poverty line to apply, prove their homelessness status (DHCD, 2016) and be homeless due to one of four conditions: domestic violence, disaster, eviction or health and safety (Massachusetts State Acts of 2016, Chapter 133, “An Act Making Appropriations for the Fiscal Year 2017,” Line Item 7004-0101). Eligibility is determined by staff at one of DHCD’s 18 field offices.

When a family is determined to be EA eligible, the referral is sent to a centralized placement unit where the demographic composition of the family and other issues (Americans with Disabilities Act requirements, domestic violence, other special requests) are examined in relation to any units that are available in the system. If there are no vacancies, the family is referred to a hotel/motel. DHCD is required to place a family in a shelter within 20 miles of its home community if there are openings in those areas. However, when there are no openings within 20 miles, families may be placed farther away from their home communities. In these instances, DHCD is required to transfer the family to a shelter within 20 miles of its home community as soon as there is an opening unless the family prefers not to relocate (Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development (EOHED), 2013). If neither option is available, then shelter is sought outside the community of origin, followed by a motel outside the community of origin.

The DHCD Emergency Assistance data available for this report do not include families’ jurisdictions of origin, only the jurisdictions in which they are placed. To help address the question of the extent to which families

FIGURE 3  
**Shelter Type, FY2016**



Source: Data provided by DHCD

are placed outside their community of origin, DHCD conducted a focused analysis of the application data and Emergency Assistance data for one day in 2016 (March 2, 2016). This analysis found that 33% of the 1,162 families applying from Boston and entering shelter were placed in communities other than Boston (DHCD communication, April 1, 2016). Major reasons for placement outside of the originating area include capacity issues near the applicant’s home as well as domestic violence. For example, during the period of July 1, 2015, through Feb 29, 2016, 12% of sheltered families gave the reason of domestic violence for their homelessness. In these instances, families are intentionally housed away from their home community for safety reasons.

Geographic placement is an area of concern in the system (Weinreb, Rog and Greer, 2016). Even in instances in which families are placed within 20 miles of their home community, placement in a different neighborhood can still disrupt a family’s relationships with health care, community and personal supports, and cause families to go to great lengths to stay connected with their communities of origin.

Once deemed EA eligible, a family also can be offered a diversion option through HomeBASE. HomeBASE, as described in Section III, is a flexible housing stabilization option administered by nonprofit agencies contracted with DHCD that allows a family to remain in its current housing situation and avoid entering shelter. Diversion workers work with clients to become aware of the alternatives to shelter and problem solve with them around their housing situation with available resources. For example, in the situation of a young woman and her child living with the woman’s mother, the diversion worker might explore whether providing some rental assistance or utility payments would allow the young family to continue to live in that home.

Kristen, a 36-year-old woman with three children from Dorchester, was placed in a shelter in Greenfield due to capacity issues. She drove her children back and forth to Dorchester (approximately 100 miles each way) every day to allow them to continue to attend the same school.

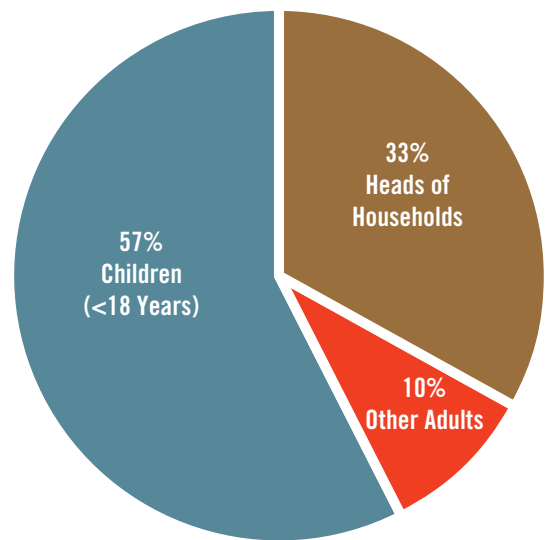
## Characteristics of the EA Population

Since FY2008, 33,388 family households have received EA shelter at least one time, accounting for 102,030 individuals. More than half (57%) of the family members over the nine-year period were children under the age of 18 at first enrollment. Thirty-three percent were heads of household and the remaining 10% were other adults in the household (see **Figure 4**).

Heads of household are, on average, 30 years old and predominately white (56%) or African American (37%); 40% are Hispanic. The majority of heads of household (91%) are female. Families typically have two to three family members (average 2.84). Only 5% of the families have had more than four family members, ranging to a high of 16 family members. Twelve percent of the families have only one member (reflecting single pregnant women).

Monique, a 27-year-old African-American mother of one (four years old), lost her job, could not pay the rent and was in the process of being evicted when she entered shelter. She stayed in a congregate shelter for four months.

FIGURE 4  
Size and Composition of the EA Population (FY2008–2016)



Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

Family characteristics vary somewhat by region within the state, especially with respect to race and ethnicity. As **Table 1** shows, Boston has the lowest percentage of families identified as white, whereas the West has the highest percentage of white families. The highest percentage of Hispanic families is in the West, and the lowest is in the southern part of the state.

Analyses of the characteristics of the population over time indicate that the demographic profile of families has remained largely consistent over time with respect to age of the head of household, and racial and ethnic composition. In FY2016, for example, the characteristics of families served generally reflect the findings about the population served over the nine-year time frame. Fifty-nine percent of the family members were under

the age of 18, a third were heads of household and 10% were other adults. Of the children, nearly half (49%) were two years old or younger. A fifth of the children (21%) were preschool age (3–5 years), whereas the remaining 30% were school age (6–17 years old). On average, FY2016 families were headed by a 30-year-old female. More than half of the families were white and 38% were black. Forty percent of the families identified as being Hispanic.

Family size, however, has significantly increased over time (see **Figure 5**). Average family size in FY2008 was 2.58 and increased to 3.10 in FY2016. As **Figure 6** shows, the size of families receiving EA shelter increased significantly over the nine years in all regions of the state except the Central region, with the greatest

TABLE 1

**Demographic Characteristics, Head of Household (FY2008–2016)**

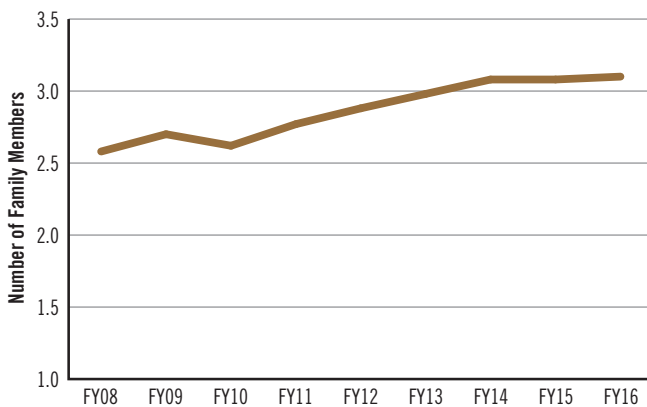
	Total	Boston	North	West	Central	South
n=	33,388 <sup>1</sup>	9,401	6,204	6,241	4,566	6,927
Average age (in years)	29.7	30.1	30.2	28.9	29.6	29.7
% female	91	91	91	91	92	91
Race						
% white	56	35	66	74	63	55
% black	37	56	26	21	30	38
% other	2	2	3	1	2	2
% unknown	5	7	5	6	5	5
% Hispanic	40	39	43	57	43	21
Family size	2.84	2.67	2.89	3.03	2.81	2.85

1. Region is missing for 39 families.

Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

FIGURE 5

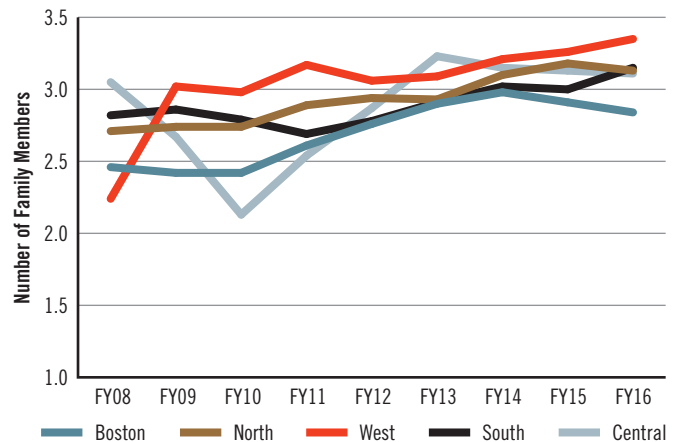
**Household Size (FY2008–2016)**



Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

FIGURE 6

**Household Size by Region (FY2008–2016)**



Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

increase occurring in the West. The increase is largely due to a consistent growth in the percentage of families with a spouse or partner, from 8% in FY2008 to more than double that percentage at nearly 20% in FY2016. As **Figure 7** shows, the head of household was constant over time, the number of children increased slightly and the number of other adults increased more steadily over the nine-year period. This pattern is true in every region. Larger families are more likely to be in scattered-site and co-shelter options; congregate shelters have the smallest family sizes (**Table 2**).

## Growth in the EA Population

The size of the EA shelter population has increased dramatically between FY2008 and FY2016, with respect to new entrants as well as numbers served at any given time. As **Figure 8** indicates, the number of new enrollments has more than doubled since FY2008, with 2,302 families entering the system at that time, increasing to 4,794 families in FY2016. The pattern over time in new enrollments has fluctuated, however. The number of new entrants increased through and after the recession, but dipped in FY2012 and FY2013; this dip coincided with the introduction of the new, more restrictive

eligibility criteria. However, FY2014 saw a large increase in new enrollments, up to 6,383 from 4,587, which dipped slightly in FY2015 and then returned to a level in FY2016 (4,794) that approaches the FY2012 numbers. Four of these “dips” also coincide with efforts to divert families, discussed in Section IV.

Continuing enrollments also account for the number of families in EA shelter at any given time. Continuing enrollments, as described below, are related to longer lengths of stay in the system.

As **Figure 9** displays, families seek EA assistance for various reasons. Data from EA Placement Forms, available for FY2014–2016, indicate that health and safety concerns were most frequently reported as a reason for homelessness, with more than half of the families noting one or more such concerns. Having an irregular housing situation or one not meant for human habitation was the most common health and safety concern reported. Other non-health and safety reasons reported for needing EA assistance included eviction or threatened eviction, domestic violence and HomeBASE support ending.<sup>5</sup>

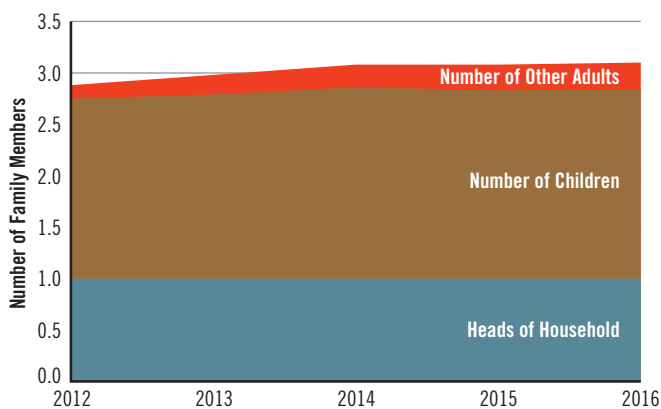
## Length of Stay in EA Shelters

Length of stay is examined for families with completed episodes who had their first EA shelter episode between FY2008 and FY2013. Restricting the analysis to families who entered by FY2013 provides at least four years following enrollment to examine length of stay. Length of stay is measured cumulatively for each family, including all time spent in one or more stays between a family’s entry and FY2016.

For this cohort of families, the average length of stay across the state is 267 days, but there is a great deal of variation among families. Only 12% of families exit EA within one month, 28% exit within 90 days and about a quarter (27%) stay for more than a year and up to 5.6 years (again, likely in two or more stays).

FIGURE 7

### Household Size and Composition (FY2008–2016)



Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

TABLE 2

### Household Size by Type of Shelter Entered<sup>1</sup>

	Scattered	Hotel	Congregate	Co-Shelter
n=	7,779	11,536	10,611	7,729
Average family size	3.21***	3.05***	2.35	3.21***

1. Average family size is the same for type of shelter exited, as well.

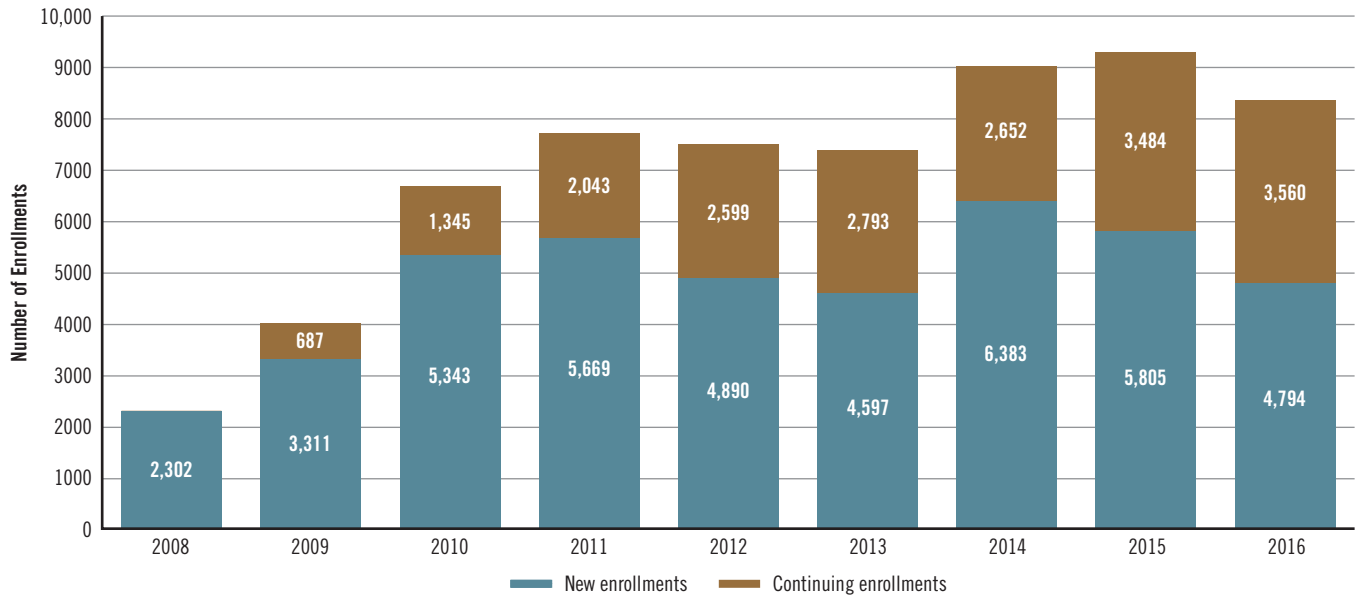
Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

\*\*\* p < .001 (Significance test compares each type of shelter with congregate)

Several factors explain this variability in length of stay. Multivariate regression was conducted to examine the relationship between length of stay and each selected variable while holding other factors constant. Findings, presented in **Table 3**, indicate that a family’s length of

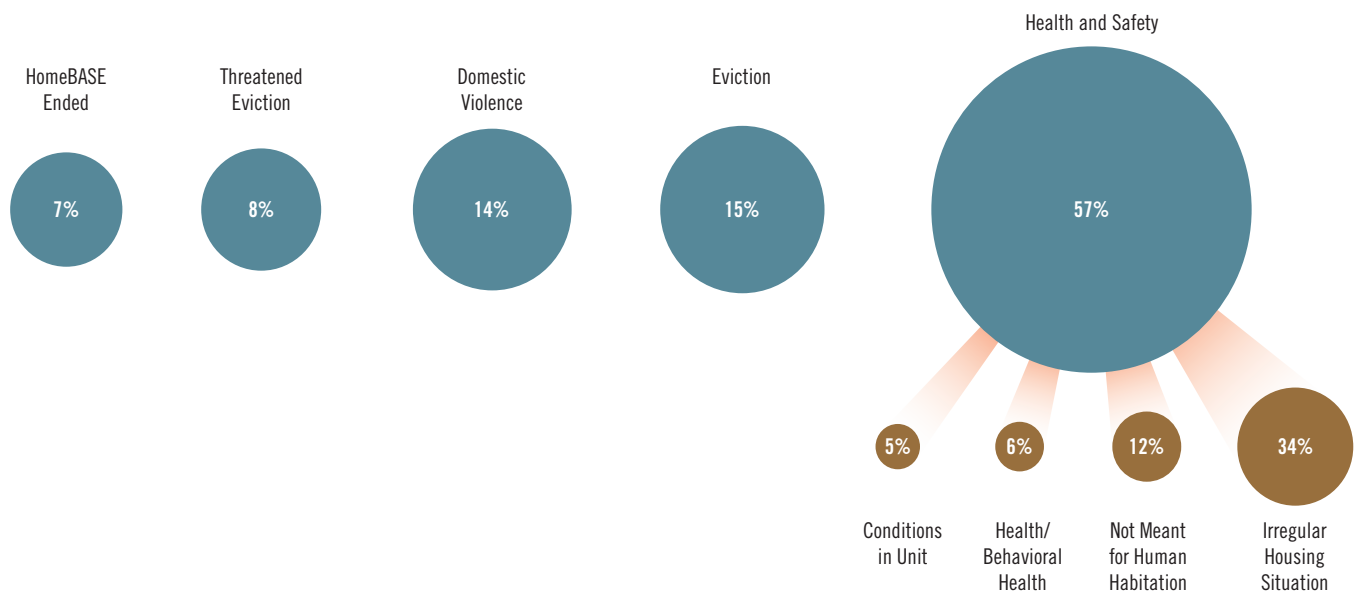
stay in EA shelters over the past nine years is predicted by the year it entered the system, family characteristics, the type of shelter entered and the region of Massachusetts in which it entered. Each of these factors is described in the sections to follow.

FIGURE 8  
Number of Families in the EA System over Time (FY2008–2016)



Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

FIGURE 9  
Reasons for Homelessness (FY2014–2016)



Source: EA Placement Forms

*Increase over Time:* Consistent with the growth in continuing enrollments as shown in Figure 8, length of stay in EA shelters has significantly increased over time. As **Figure 10** illustrates, the average time families received EA has increased from an average of 247 days for families entering in FY2008 to nearly a year in shelter (an average of 360 days) for families entering in FY2013. This increase is more than 100 days—with families entering in FY2013 staying in shelter nearly four months longer than for families entering five years prior.

TABLE 3  
**Variables Related to  
 Length of Stay for Entrants FY2008–2013**

Variable	Significantly Decreased	No Change	Significantly Increased
Year of First EA Enrollment <sup>1</sup>			
2009***			▲
2010***			▲
2011***			▲
2012***			▲
2013***			▲
Demographic Characteristics			
Age (in years)		=	
Family size***			▲
Female*			▲
Black***			▲
Hispanic***			▲
Region <sup>2</sup>			
Boston***			▲
North***			▲
West		=	
Central***	▼		
Type of Unit <sup>3</sup>			
Hotel**			▲
Scattered-Site***			▲
Co-Shelter**			▲

1. Compared to 2008  
 2. Compared to South  
 3. Compared to congregate shelters

▲ = significant positive relationship  
 = = significant negative relationship  
 ▼ = no significant relationship

\* p < .05  
 \*\* p < .01  
 \*\*\* p < .001 (Significance test compares each type of shelter with congregate)

Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

Families who return to shelter, on average, have longer cumulative lengths of stay than families with one episode. Families who return to EA two or more times have longer average lengths of stay (412 days) than families who receive EA only once (230 days). In addition, time in the system increases with the number of times a family receives EA. However, the number of returns explains only a portion of the increase in length of stay. The same increase over time in length of stay holds when the analysis is limited to families with a single stay; their length of time increases from an average of 183 days for families who entered in FY2008 to an average of 330 days for families entering the system in FY2013.

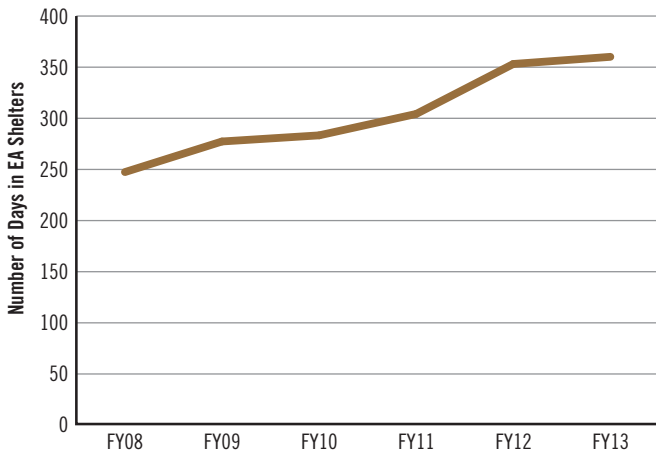
*Differences by Family Characteristics:* Family characteristics also explain some of the differences in length of stay, even when controlling for the region of the state in which families stay. Families with longer lengths of stay are larger in size and more likely to have a head of household who is black, Hispanic and female than families with shorter lengths of stay. Age of the head of household is not a statistically significant factor in explaining length of stay. These findings thus suggest that across the state, families of color are more likely to stay in shelter longer and possibly have more difficulty exiting, as are families with a greater number of family members. Although the vast majority of EA families are headed by females, the small percentage of families headed by males (9%) is more likely to leave shelter earlier, on average, than female-headed families.

Megan, a 23-year-old single mother of two (three-year-old son and nine-month-old daughter), first entered a scattered site shelter in the South in FY2009. She stayed for five months and then exited to live with her mother. She entered EA a second time, in FY2011, staying in a hotel for four months before exiting to return to her mother’s home, and entered EA a third time, staying in a scattered-site shelter for three months. Her total stay across the three episodes was 398 days. Upon her exit from the final stay she received \$4,000 of HomeBASE housing stabilization assistance.



FIGURE 10

### Cumulative Length of Stay (in Days) in EA Shelters: New Entrants, FY2008–2013



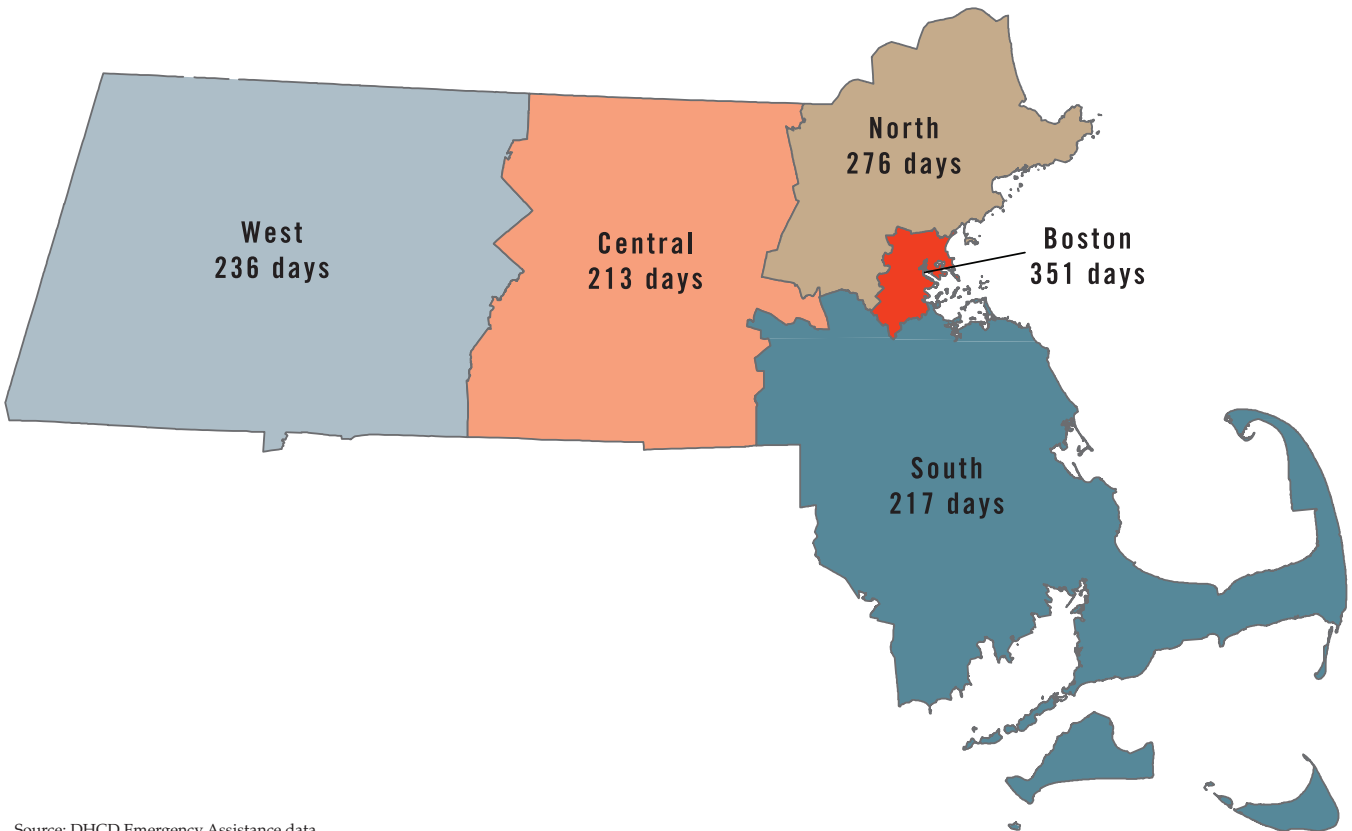
Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

*Regional Differences:* Not surprisingly, the region of the state in which a family enters EA relates to length of stay. As indicated in **Figure 11**, new entrants in Boston have the longest average length of stay in the state, more than 100 days longer than families in shelter in the West, Central and South. New entrants in the Central region have had the shortest average length of stay with 213 days over the nine-year time period.

In addition, although length of stay has increased in all regions of the state (**Figure 12**), the increase has been greatest in Boston and the Central region, where the average length of stay for families that entered EA in FY2013 is about 150 days longer than the average length of stay for families that entered in FY2008. In contrast, the average length of stay increases by fewer than 50 days for families entering between FY2008 and FY2013 in the South and West; in fact, length of stay for FY2013 families in these two regions showed a decrease from FY2012.

FIGURE 11

### Average Cumulative Length of Stay across Regions, for New Entrants, FY2008–2013

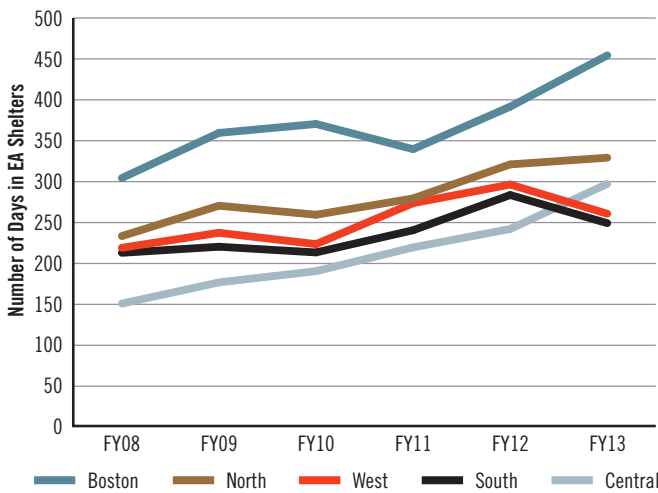


Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

These regional differences are likely due to a number of factors, especially those related to the tightness and cost of the housing market.

FIGURE 12

**Cumulative Length of Stay (in Days) in EA Shelters by Region: New Entrants, FY2008–2013**



Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

*Type of Unit:* Families with longer EA stays are more likely to enter hotels, scattered-site shelter and co-shelter than congregate shelter. Within a single episode in the EA system families may also move from one shelter to another (see **Table 4**). Data on moves within the system were available through an analysis by DHCD for families that had completed episodes in FY2015 through FY2016. The majority of families (67%) had only one enrollment, most commonly either congregate shelter (25%) or hotel (25%).

Nearly 31% of all families had two enrollments. Families most often moved when they first entered hotel; 85% of families that moved within an EA episode initially

Maria, a 26-year-old married mother of four, entered a hotel. After five months in the hotel she moved to a scattered-site location when one became available. After five months in that location the family relocated to a congregate shelter in their preferred community where they remained for 16 months.

TABLE 4

**Most Frequent Enrollment Patterns, FY2015–2016 Completed Episodes**

Enrollment Pattern	# Families	# Families	Average Episode Days
<b>Congregate</b>			
Congregate only	2,004	25%	195
Congregate > congregate	241	3%	249
Congregate > scattered-site	149	2%	438
<b>Scattered Site</b>			
Scattered-site only	723	9%	356
<b>Co-Shelter</b>			
Co-shelter only	611	8%	158
<b>Hotel</b>			
Hotel only	1,968	25%	299
Hotel > hotel	306	4%	430
Hotel > congregate	735	9%	357
Hotel > scattered-site	825	10%	474
Hotel > co-shelter	250	3%	349
Hotel > congregate > scattered-site	87	3%	541

Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

entered a hotel/motel. Most of this movement is due to a family being placed in a hotel/motel and then moved to a shelter either once a unit is available or to be closer to community of origin, job, schools or service providers. Families that entered hotels and moved to one or more different shelters also had the longest lengths of stays (ranging from 349 to 541 days). The remaining 15% of moves involved moving from a congregate shelter to another congregate or scattered-site shelter.

## Returns to EA Shelter

Returns to shelter are another important dynamic of shelter use. Returns were examined only for families entering the system between FY2008 and FY2013 to allow sufficient time for families to return to the system within the study period.

On average, nearly a quarter (23%) of the families entering the system between FY2008 and FY2013 returned at least one time and less than 5% of families returned between two and five times. In general, families exiting EA are not eligible to return to EA within 12 months. However, there are a few exceptions to this rule: Families leaving EA with HomeBASE household assistance may return within 90 days; families granted a temporary shelter interruption may return within 30 days; and families terminated from the system who appeal their termination within 10 days can be placed back in shelter pending adjudication of their appeal. Twenty-six percent of families that returned to shelter did indeed return within one year. However, the average time to return among all returning families was 788 days, with over a quarter returning after more than three years.

Based on a logistic regression, which examines the influence of each factor within the context of all other factors, families are more likely to return if: they enter the system earlier in the nine-year span; have heads of household who are younger, black or African American, Hispanic and female; have larger families; and exit from their first episode from congregate or co-shelters and from the South (as opposed to Central). (See **Table 5**.) Each of these factors is described more completely.

*Increases over Time:* In contrast to length of stay, returns to the system within three years have decreased over time; however, the pattern is not clear cut. Returns increased steadily for each cohort through FY2011, but have decreased for the cohorts of families who entered the system in FY2012 and FY2013 (see **Table 6**).

*Family Characteristics:* As with length of stay, family characteristics also explain some of the differences in return rates. Like those with longer lengths of stay, families more likely to return are those larger in size and headed by an adult who is black, Hispanic and female. Families headed by a younger head of household are also more likely to return to shelter over the period examined. These findings, together with the data on length of stay, highlight similar characteristics and suggest there may be subsets of families that have difficulty not only exiting shelter but also remaining housed. These

TABLE 5  
Variables Related to Returns to EA  
for New Entrants FY2008–2013

Covariate	Significantly Decreased	No Change	Significantly Increased
Year of First EA Enrollment <sup>1</sup>			
2009*			▲
2010***			▲
2011*			▲
2012***	▼		
2013		=	
Demographic Characteristics			
Age (in years)***	▼		
Family size***			▲
Female*			▲
Black***			▲
Hispanic***			▲
Region <sup>2</sup>			
Boston		=	
North		=	
West		=	
Central***	▼		
Type of Unit <sup>3</sup>			
Hotel***	▼		
Scattered-Site**	▼		
Co-Shelter***			▲

1. Compared to 2008
2. Compared to South
3. Compared to congregate shelters

- ▲ = significant positive relationship
- = = significant negative relationship
- ▼ = no significant relationship

\* p < .05

\*\* p < .01

\*\*\* p < .001 (Significance test compares each type of shelter with congregate)

Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

TABLE 6

**Percent of Families Entering EA in Each Fiscal Year and Returning to the System within Three Years**

	Total	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012	FY2013
n=	22,551	2,330	3,022	4,869	4,978	3,916	3,436
% Returned	17%	18%	19%***	17%***	20%**	14%	13%***

\*\* p < .01

\*\*\* p < .001 (Significance test compares each type of shelter with congregate)

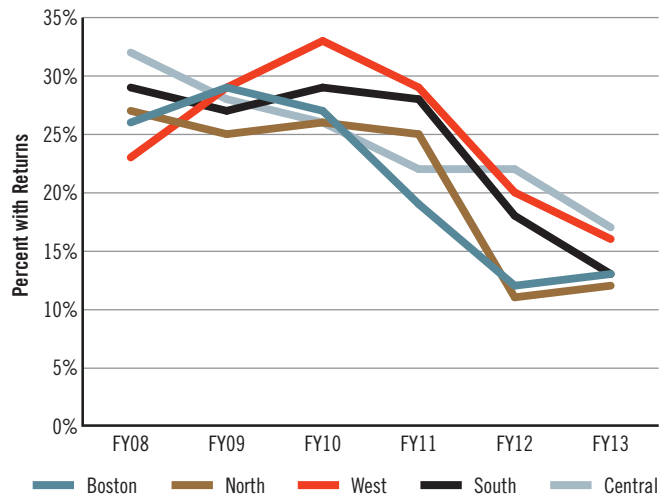
Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

findings, as noted in Section V, may have implications for more targeted assistance by the system.

*Regional Differences:* Interestingly, there are fewer regional differences in return rates than in length of stay among the cohorts served. Returns have decreased over time for families entering from all regions, and are most recently least likely from the North and Boston, as shown in **Figure 13**.

*Type of Unit:* Families are significantly more likely to return if their first episode was a congregate shelter, less likely if their first episode began in a hotel or scattered-site shelter (see **Table 7**). This may be explained in part by the variance in typical length of stay at the different types of shelter. Families entering hotels and scattered site shelter are more likely to have longer lengths of stay than those entering congregate shelters. Families with longer lengths of stay have less time to return within the study period. Similarly, there may be other differences among the types of unit that affect families' length of stay, such as access to case management or other services.

FIGURE 13  
**Returns to Shelter by Region:  
New Entrants, FY2008–2013**



Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

TABLE 7

**Percent Returned to EA by First Shelter Type for Entrants in FY2008–2013<sup>1</sup>**

	Scattered	Hotel	Congregate
n=	2,020	16,184	4,135
% Returned to EA	20%***	22%***	25%

1. Co-shelter is omitted from this analysis because only 10 families enrolled in co-shelter as their first location between FY2008 and FY2013.

\*\*\* p < .001 (Significance test compares each type of shelter with congregate)

Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

## Patterns of EA Use

In previous research Culhane and colleagues (2007) used cluster analysis to develop a typology of family homelessness based on the number and duration of shelter stays. The majority of families in this study proved to be temporary stayers who remained in shelter relatively briefly and did not return. Smaller subsets of families remained in shelter for long periods of time or returned repeatedly to shelter.

Consistent with this approach, cluster analyses were performed in the current study to explore whether the EA caseload had unique subsets of families based on length of stay, returns and exits. The analysis produced four subsets of homeless families with distinct patterns of shelter utilization (**Figure 14**): temporary stayers, long stayers, repeat stayers and a group of both long and repeat stayers. As found by Culhane and colleagues, temporary stayers made up the majority of the caseload

**Temporary stayer:** Shondra, a 32-year-old African-American mother with two children (ages 1 and 3), first entered a hotel in central Massachusetts in FY2012. She stayed in shelter for two months. Upon exit, she received HomeBASE. She did not have a return to shelter.

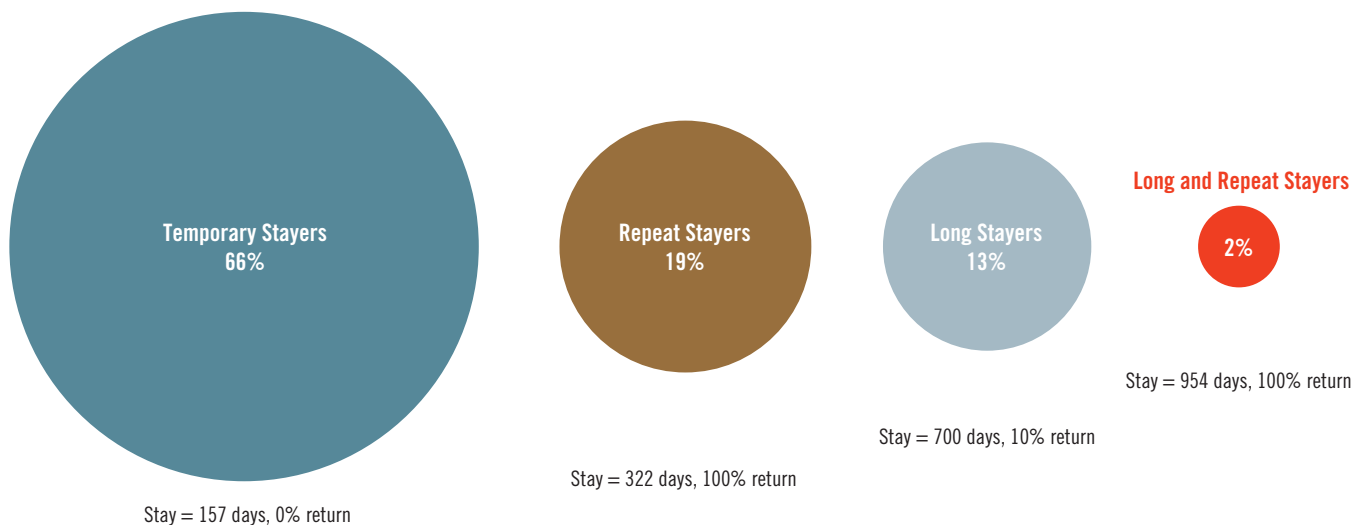
**Long stayer:** Ana, a 34-year-old Hispanic mother with three children (ages 3, 7 and 13), entered a scattered-site shelter in Boston in FY2012. She stayed for 760 days. She received HomeBASE in FY2016 but never returned to EA.

**Repeat stayer:** Tammy, a 29-year-old white mother with two children (ages 5 and 8), first entered congregate shelter in western Massachusetts in FY2009 and stayed for 14 months. Five years later she entered a congregate shelter in FY2015 and stayed for eight months.

**Long and repeat stayer:** Hayley, a 29-year-old white mother with three children (ages 2, 7 and 15), first entered a hotel in northern Massachusetts in FY2009. She stayed for one month and then moved to a congregate shelter in central Massachusetts for eight additional months. She returned to a scattered-site shelter in FY2015 for 10 months and returned a third time to a congregate shelter in FY2016 for four months. Her total stay was about two years. She did not receive HomeBASE upon her exit.

FIGURE 14

### Patterns of Shelter Use among Families Receiving EA



Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

(66%). Families in this category remained relatively briefly in shelter (but still an average of approximately six months) with 38% exiting within 90 days and not returning. About a fifth of the caseload involved repeat stayers (19%) who stayed in shelter a cumulative average of 11 months, involving multiple stays. Long stayers (13%) remained in shelter for nearly two years but did not return after exiting in the time frame examined. A very small subset of families fit the pattern of long *and* repeat stayers (2%), having an average cumulative stay of over two and one half years involving multiple stays.

The type of shelter that a family exits from distinguishes the clusters. Across the state, families exiting from scattered-site shelter are more likely to be in either the cluster of long stayers or the cluster of long stayers and repeaters than in other clusters, holding other variables constant. Conversely, in all but one region of the state (South), families who exit from hotels are more likely to be in the cluster of families with temporary stays. Families from Boston are also more likely to be in the cluster of longer stayers and repeaters than in other clusters.

## Summary

The number of families receiving EA since FY2008 has increased dramatically. The number of new entrants and total families served has fluctuated some over time, with slight dips in FY2012, FY2013 and FY2016. The overall trend, however, has been a more than doubling of the EA caseload since FY2008. There have been two recent positive developments: Since FY2014 the total number of new enrollments in shelter has decreased and the number of families placed in hotels/motels has decreased.

Average length of stay in EA shelter continues to increase across the state, especially in Boston. Average length of stay across the state is 267 days, but in Boston it approaches a year at 351 days. Two-thirds of the families are categorized as “temporary stayers,” but even their average length of stay approximates six months. Families with particular struggles exiting are families headed by African American or Hispanic females as well as families that are larger in size.

About a fifth of the families receiving EA return to the system within three years with some indication that the rate of return may be decreasing over time. Families that return share many of the characteristics of families who have difficulty exiting. There are far fewer regional differences in returns than in length of stay. Finally, families who enter congregate shelter in their first EA episode have the shortest average length of stays but, along with families served through co-shelters, are more likely to return.

## SECTION III.

# Relationship between Emergency Assistance Use and Other Assistance Programs

In Massachusetts, homeless families and families at risk of homelessness are eligible to receive other types of support in addition to Emergency Assistance (EA), such as prevention, diversion and time-limited housing assistance. In this section, we describe these homeless assistance programs and analyze the extent to which EA families receive assistance from these programs and how EA families' receipt of assistance compares to that of non-EA families.

### Description of Other Homeless Assistance Programs

*RAFT:* The Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) program is Massachusetts' largest homelessness and eviction prevention program. When RAFT began as a pilot program in 2005, its benefit to families was a one-time payment of \$1,500–\$3,000. In 2006, the program became a regular component of Massachusetts' support services and the maximum payments increased to \$4,000 within a 12-month period. RAFT spending was temporarily cut from FY2010 to FY2012 and fully restored in FY2013 (Hoffenberg, 2016). RAFT offers families at risk of homelessness prevention services tailored to each family's needs, which can include: moving costs, rent and utility arrears, utility bills, security deposits, utility startup costs, first/last month's rent and furniture (costs for furniture are limited to \$1,000). Starting in FY2014, eligibility is determined by a set of income and homelessness risk criteria, including a screening based on prevention research in New York City (Shinn, Greer, Bainbridge, Kwon and Zuiderveen, 2013). Although families are only eligible for RAFT once in a 12-month period, they can apply for EA services if they become homeless within this time frame (EOHED, 2016).

*HomeBASE:* HomeBASE, which began in 2011, is a flexible housing stabilization option administered by nonprofit agencies contracted with the Department

of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). The program can be used for either diversion in lieu of shelter or stabilization following shelter. A family that is EA eligible can be offered a diversion option to remain in its current housing situation or find new housing and avoid a shelter placement. Families work with diversion workers in eligibility offices to determine alternatives to shelter and assess how they might use available resources to solve their housing problem. Families can receive 12 months of stabilization support to assist them in retaining their housing. The current maximum benefit for a 12-month period is \$8,000 (Turley, 2014).

HomeBASE can also be used as a shallow subsidy for stabilization for families who are exiting shelters and hotels. Money can be used for first and last month's rent or a security deposit as well as to cover expenses to travel out of state. All HomeBASE families, whether diverted from EA or exiting EA, also receive up to 12 months of stabilization services that include case management support, help in securing services and pursuing employment, and assistance with long-term housing needs (EOHED, 2013a). When HomeBASE was first introduced, state regulations prevented families receiving housing assistance from returning to EA for 12 months; however, in FY2013 that restriction was reduced to three months.

*Additional Programs:* In addition to RAFT and HomeBASE, Massachusetts has had several earlier programs to assist families with prevention, diversion and rehousing. These programs, generally available from FY2009 to FY2012, largely preceded RAFT (in its second iteration, beginning in FY2013) and HomeBASE. The programs included FLEX, Toolbox and the federal Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP), as well as a one-time infusion of state spending in FY2010. These programs were available to EA-eligible families.

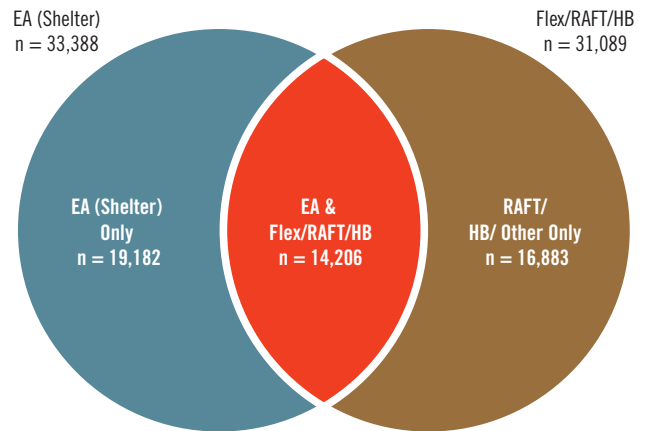
## Overall Receipt of Other Homeless Assistance

Across these programs, a total of 31,089 families have received one or more instances of assistance, with the highest rates of receipt of each type of assistance in FY2013, FY2014 and FY2015 (see **Figure 15**). Since FY2009, 11,357 families across the state have received RAFT, with the largest numbers receiving it in FY2013, FY2014 and FY2015. A total of 11,731 families have received HomeBASE stabilization assistance; the years with the highest numbers of families receiving it were FY2013, FY2014 and FY2015. A total of 7,919 families received HomeBASE diversion assistance in place of EA, with the bulk of families served from FY2012 forward. The number of new entrants to EA also dropped in FY2012, FY2013, FY2015 and FY2016, suggesting that EA and diversion may be related at least to some degree.

**Figure 16** displays the overlap in receipt of EA and other homeless assistance programs. Among EA families, 43% (14,206) also received one or more of the other types of assistance.

As **Table 8** indicates, of the EA families that received additional assistance, 89% received HomeBASE, while much smaller percentages received RAFT (13%) or other assistance (15%). Among EA families, HomeBASE was most often used as stabilization assistance following a stay in EA, as opposed to diversion assistance. In contrast, of the 16,883 families that did not enter EA

FIGURE 16  
Overlap in Receipt of EA and Other Homeless Assistance Programs



Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance and Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program data

and received assistance from one or more of these other programs, 58% received RAFT, 45% received HomeBASE diversion assistance and only 2% received a different type of assistance.

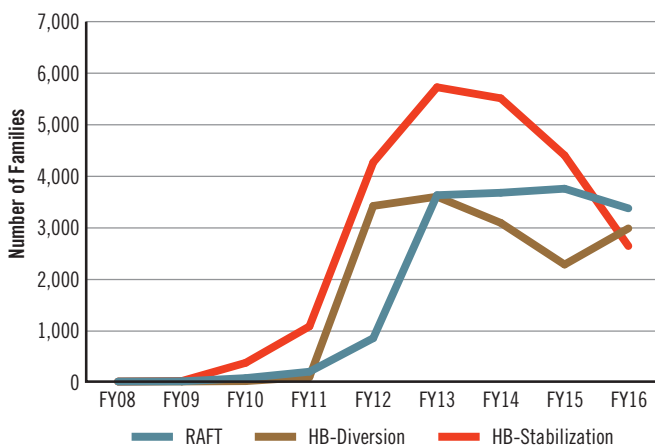
EA families received considerably more assistance both in terms of frequency and dollars than non-EA families. Families with an EA stay received almost double (average of 13.2 disbursements) the assistance received by families without an EA stay (average of 7.4 disbursements). However, in both groups there is a great deal of variation. Among EA families, 12% received only one disbursement of assistance and 33% received more than 12 disbursements. Among non-EA families, 29% received only one disbursement and 16% received more than 12 disbursements of assistance. Similarly, families with an EA stay received an average of \$9,677 in assistance compared to \$5,905 received on average by non-EA families. The amount of assistance ranged from \$0 to almost \$50,000; however, the majority of both EA (59%) and non-EA (85%) families received \$8,000 of assistance or less.<sup>6</sup>

## Receipt of RAFT by EA Families

As **Table 9** shows, only 5% (1,834) of all 33,388 EA families received RAFT. Of those receiving it, 75% received it after their first EA stay (presumably to prevent a return to shelter). The remaining 25% of those 1,834 families (representing a small portion of all families that received

FIGURE 15

## Number of Families Receiving RAFT and HomeBASE All Families, FY2008–2016



Source: DHCD Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program data



TABLE 8

### Receipt of RAFT, HomeBASE and Prior Prevention and Rehousing Programs among All Families

	Total	EA Families	Non-EA Families
n=	31,089	14,206	16,883
Type of Assistance Received			
RAFT	37%	13%	58%
HomeBASE	65%	89%	45%
Other assistance	8%	15%	2%
Number of Disbursements Received			
Mean	10.2	13.2	7.4
Range	1–82	1–82	1–80
Dollar Amount of Assistance			
Mean	\$7,641	\$9,677	\$5,905
Range	\$0–49,810	\$0–49,810	\$0–49,630

Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance and Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program data

RAFT) received RAFT prior to their EA stay, suggesting that in these cases the resources did not prevent shelter entry.

EA families that received RAFT compared with those that did not receive it were more likely, based on a logistic regression, to have heads of household who are black, non-Hispanic and female; have larger families; have shorter stays in EA; and exit from their first episode from hotels (as opposed to scattered-site shelters) and from regions other than the South. These findings suggest that for EA families, RAFT is being targeted to some of the families that have the highest probability of returning, especially if they are larger and/or African-American families.

### Receipt of HomeBASE by EA Families

Thirty-seven percent of EA families have received HomeBASE, with 3% receiving diversion assistance and 35% receiving stabilization assistance. Based on a logistic regression, families who received HomeBASE were more likely to have heads of household who were older, black, Hispanic and female; have larger families; have longer stays in EA; exit from their first episode from co-shelters (as opposed to scattered-site shelters) and exit from the South (as opposed to Boston or Central Massachusetts).

TABLE 9

### Receipt of RAFT, HomeBASE and Prior Prevention and Rehousing Programs among EA Families

	Total
n=	4,135
Type of Assistance Received	
RAFT	5%
HomeBASE	37%
Other assistance	6%

Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance and Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program data

### Receipt of Other Types of Housing Assistance

Upon exit from EA, families often received other kinds of assistance in addition to RAFT, HomeBASE and the additional diversion and rehousing programs. These sources include Section 8 subsidies, Massachusetts Voucher Rental Program (MVRP) subsidies, public housing and Leading the Way Home BHA, a permanent rental subsidy provided by Boston Housing Authority, among others (see Glossary, page 45). Data were available from DHCD on exit assistance for families exiting shelters and hotels in FY2014 through FY2016. As **Table 10** illustrates, 12% received Section 8 assistance, 8% received other public housing and 8% received a permanent rental voucher through MRVP. Several other types of assistance were received by other families, but 31% received no assistance. Families exiting hotels were more likely to receive HomeBASE and MRVP than families exiting shelters.

TABLE 10

### Type of Other Exit Assistance for Shelter and Hotel Exits (FY2014–2016)

	Total (N=7,607)	EA Families (N=5,952)	Non-EA Families (N=1,862)
HomeBASE	50%	40%	86%
Section 8 (housing voucher or project based)	12%	12%	16%
Other public housing	8%	8%	9%
MRVP	8%	5%	19%
Leading the Way Home BHA	6%	7%	<1%
Private subsidized housing (e.g., tax credit unit, project based subsidized)	4%	4%	7%
CoC Supportive Housing Program (SHP)	1%	1%	<1%
Transportation out of state	<1%	<1%	<1%
ESG	<1%	<1%	<1%
No other assistance	31%	36%	11%

1. 207 families exited both shelter and hotel during this time period

Source: DHCD Emergency Assistance data

## Summary

Between FY2008 and FY2016, more than 31,000 families in Massachusetts have received homeless and housing assistance other than EA. The majority of these families (54%) did not enter EA but instead received RAFT prevention assistance (37%) or HomeBASE diversion assistance (65%).

About half of the families who have had an EA stay also received support from HomeBASE, RAFT, or one of the earlier programs. HomeBASE has been the most common program received by EA families, with almost equal numbers of families receiving diversion assistance (before or in place of EA) and stabilization assistance (following EA). Families most likely to receive it are older, black, Hispanic and female-headed; have larger families; have longer stays in EA; and exit from co-shelters. The targeting of the resource thus appears to be largely on families who are having difficulty exiting shelter.

## SECTION IV.

# Comparing Trends in Massachusetts to National and Selected City Trends

We have examined the trends in the country as a whole as well as in two selected cities, New York City and Seattle/King County, to provide additional insight into the changes in family homelessness in Massachusetts, especially in Boston. New York City, though considerably larger than Boston, was selected as a comparison because it is also a “right to shelter” jurisdiction. Seattle/King County was selected as a non-right to shelter community that is comparable to Boston on a number of contextual characteristics that relate to homelessness, such as population size, rental vacancy rate (2014), median home values, overall cost of living and housing costs.

We begin this section by reviewing key characteristics of these three communities and how they compare nationally to provide an understanding of the contexts that relate to homelessness. Using comparable PIT data and Housing Inventory Counts (Point-in-Time inventories reported annually to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) by each Continuum of Care on the number of beds and units available in each type of housing program), we compare the trends in family homelessness and the size and nature of the shelter and housing response. We then follow with a more in-depth examination of each comparison community based on documents and available data from each community’s Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and other sources. We then end this section with a comparative analysis and summary of the key findings.

### National and Selected Community Contexts

**Table 11** highlights selected data, primarily from the 2014 American Community Survey (ACS), on the nation as a whole and each community on the size, age and racial make-up of its population; economic factors; and housing market indicators. The table shows that the three communities are comparable on a number of dimensions and distinct from the national average on several of these dimensions. Compared to the national

average, all three communities have populations that are disproportionately working age (20–65 years of age) and all three have higher costs of living, lower vacancy rates and more expensive housing markets. Boston and New York City are more ethnically diverse than Seattle/King County and the country as whole. Seattle/King County also is economically stronger on a number of indicators than the other two communities and the nation overall.

### National and Selected Community Homelessness and Housing Inventory Trends

PIT counts, although flawed, provide some ability to compare trends in the size of the homeless family population across communities and with the nation as a whole. As noted in Section I, the number of homeless families nationwide has been decreasing steadily since 2012, with a total decrease of 22% since 2007. Boston, as with Massachusetts as a whole, has seen an increase of 43% since 2007 (see **Table 12**). Although there was a recent decrease in the count between 2015 and 2016 for the state, the number for Boston reduced only slightly, by 19 families from 1,377 to 1,358. New York City and Seattle/King County also experienced increases in homeless families since 2007 (43% and 5%, respectively) based on PIT counts. New York City and Boston have experienced a steady increase in family homelessness from 2007 to present; Seattle/King County’s numbers peaked in 2010 and have been more fluctuating since that time, but are lower now than in 2010. Seattle/King County’s trend is more consistent with the national trend.

**Figure 17** (page 36) displays the trends in how the systems are responding to family homelessness, based on Housing Inventory Counts reported to HUD (available through 2016). Nationally, emergency shelter numbers have increased slightly and there has been greater growth in rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing and a decline in transitional housing. Rapid rehousing, in particular, began to be

TABLE 11

## Contextual Comparison of Boston with Selected Communities and National Averages

Components	National	Boston	New York	Seattle/King County
<b>Population<sup>1</sup></b>				
Population size	314,107,084	639,594	8,354,889	637,850
% over 65	43,177,961 (13.7%)	66,564 (10.4%)	1,046,671 (12.5%)	72,378 (11.3%)
% between 20 and 65 years of age	188,285,640 (59.94%)	434,647 (67.96%)	5,316,588 (63.64%)	449,174 (70.42%)
% 19 and under	82,643,483 (26.31%)	138,383 (21.64%)	1,991,630 (23.84%)	116,298 (18.23%)
% white	231,849,713 (73.8%)	340,859 (53.3%)	3,646,761 (43.6%)	455,886 (74.9%)
% non-white including more than one race	82,257,371 (26.1%)	298,735 (46.7%)	4,443,132 (54.9%)	191,964 (30.1%)
<b>Economic Condition<sup>1</sup></b>				
Area median household income	\$53,482	\$54,485	\$52,737	\$67,365
% below poverty line—all families	11.5%	17.1%	17.5%	7.6%
% of families with female householder, no husband present	30.9%	34.1%	31.1%	22.5%
Cost of living [based on the national average of 100]	100.00	161.0	168.0	154.0
<b>Employment Status<sup>1</sup></b>				
Population 16 years and over in civilian labor force	158,965,511 (63.9%)	371,911 (68.2%)	4,290,031 (63.4%)	396,708 (72.4%)
Employed	143,435,233 (57.7%)	334,231 (61.3%)	3,847,245 (56.8%)	369,638 (72.2%)
Unemployed	14,504,781 (5.8%)	37,270 (6.8%)	440,068 (6.5%)	25,765 (4.7%)
<b>Housing Market<sup>1,2</sup></b>				
Vacant housing units <sup>1</sup>	16,529,941 (12.5%)	22,453 (8.2%)	312,001 (9.2%)	20,464 (6.6%)
Owner-occupied units value median <sup>1</sup>	\$175,700	\$379,500	\$490,700	\$437,400
Fair market rent (2bd) <sup>2</sup>	—	\$1,567	\$1,571	\$1,523
Vacancy rate (rental) <sup>1</sup>	6.9%	3.9%	3.7%	3.0%

1. ACS2014.

2. HUD

Source: 2014 American Community Survey data and 2016 HUD User data

TABLE 12

### Trends in Numbers of Families in Boston Compared with Selected Communities and Nationally

	National		Boston		New York		Seattle/King County	
	# families	# individuals	# families	# individuals	# families	# individuals	# families	# individuals
2007	78,535	234,558	771	2,156	9,430	29,015	886	2,795
2008	75,750	235,259	885	2,515	9,453	30,267	931	2,984
2009	78,514	238,096	845	2,438	9,633	31,155	1,028	3,349
2010	79,442	241,937	947	2,768	10,332	33,195	1,064	3,414
2011	77,184	236,175	987	2,926	10,045	30,139	1,040	3,488
2012	77,155	239,397	1,037	3,177	10,045	33,129	952	3,151
2013	70,957	222,190	1,164	3,340	11,516	39,601	894	3,120
2014	67,613	216,261	1,152	3,378	11,996	41,633	872	2,920
2015	64,197	206,286	1,377	3,953	13,233	45,711	975	3,069
2016	61,265	194,716	1,358	3,755	13,483	44,558	932	2,982

Source: Data from Point-in-Time counts.

used in 2010 with the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP) and has grown in availability over the last five years with the greatest increases since 2014. Rapid rehousing rapidly connects families and individuals experiencing homelessness to permanent housing through a tailored package of assistance that may include the use of time-limited financial assistance and targeted supportive services. For example, a family may be enrolled in rapid rehousing and placed in shelter while they look for housing. Once they find housing, the family can receive rental assistance for a limited time period (from one time to 24 months) as well as other assistance, such as move-in assistance. The focus on rapid rehousing, especially at the federal level, is intended to move families from shelter as quickly as possible so that they can return to housing in the community.

In Boston, since 2008, the number of units of emergency shelter has increased considerably, but shows some tapering in recent years. Permanent support housing is the program that shows the most increase in recent years, transitional housing decreasing somewhat, while rapid rehousing continues to be a small part of the system (approximately 1% of the total number of units available).

New York City's trends in emergency shelter, transitional housing and rapid rehousing are similar. Permanent supportive housing in New York City, however, appears to have stayed relatively steady over the years, with

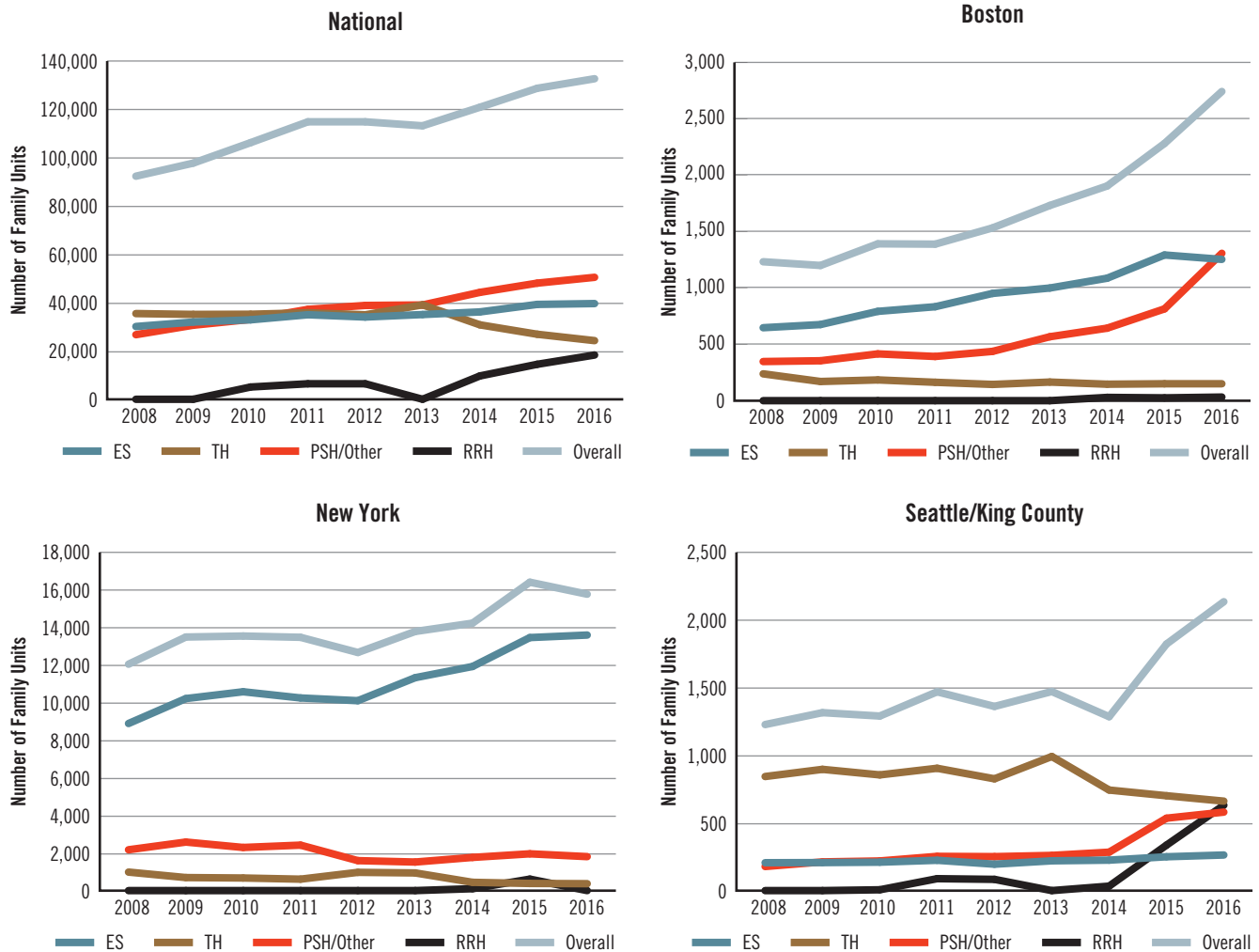
some decline in 2012. Emergency shelter has increased steadily since 2012. Transitional housing has decreased somewhat and use of permanent supportive housing has increased in both communities. Rapid rehousing is increasing in use in New York City, but still comprised only 4% of the assistance available for families in 2015.

Of the three communities, Seattle/King County's housing trends are most reflective of the national trends. Historically, however, Seattle/King County has been unusual in having a preponderance of its family units in transitional housing in part due to additional funding through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Sound Families Initiative. Seattle/King County's number of transitional housing units, though declining, was still high in 2016 at 31% of the total units available for families. In line with the national trend, Seattle/King County's focus on rapid rehousing has grown considerably, and, in FY2016, rapid rehousing accounts for 30% of the total units of assistance. Permanent supportive housing and other housing with supports have also increased since 2014.

In addition to the data collected from PIT counts and the Housing Inventory Counts, data are available on each selected area through documents and from HMIS reports. We provide a synopsis of this information in the following sections to provide a greater understanding of how each system operates and the dynamics of shelter use in each system.

FIGURE 17

## Trends in Housing Inventory Counts (Number of Units) in Boston Compared with Selected Communities and Nationally



\* ES = Emergency Shelter; TH = Transitional Housing; PSH = Permanent Supportive Housing; RRH = Rapid Rehousing; Overall = All housing types.

Source: Data from Housing Inventory Counts

### New York City

New York City, as noted, is a right to shelter jurisdiction as a result of three key court cases: (*Callahan v. Carey*, 1979; *Eldredge v. Koch*, 1983; and *McCain v. Koch*, 1983). As a right to shelter city, New York is required to provide shelter to any eligible individual or family seeking it (Durham and Johnson, 2014). The shelter system, as a result, is extensive. For families, there are 154 Tier II shelters (non-congregate), cluster-sites (previously called scatter-sites) and hotels for families with children under 18 and pregnant women; plus an additional 18 Tier II and non-Tier II facilities available for adult families.

Only four of the family shelters are operated by the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) directly—the remainder is contracted with nonprofit organizations.

In addition to shelter, homeless services for families in New York City include prevention, diversion and intake as well as rehousing. The Homebase Community Prevention Program, (bearing the same name as the Massachusetts program but a totally separate entity), is the cornerstone of the City’s prevention efforts and was established as a pilot in 2004 and expanded city-wide in 2007 to facilitate outreach to those at risk of becoming homeless. Providers screen vulnerable families with an

evidence-based risk assessment tool (Shinn et al., 2013) and provide a range of services to meet the needs of each household and help families find alternatives to shelter. Services can include anti-eviction assistance, assistance obtaining public benefits, emergency rental assistance, education and job placement assistance, financial counseling and money management, help relocating and short-term financial assistance. The program, through rigorous evaluation, has been found to be cost-effective and significantly reduces entry into family shelter (Rolston et al., 2013). Other programs (Banks, 2015) include diversion tools that provide assistance in completing paperwork as well as short-term financial assistance, early intervention outreach to families in need of legal assistance or emergency rental assistance, and a landlord ombudsman program to address the needs and concerns of landlords and management companies.

The city also has several rental assistance programs. In particular, a new short-term rental assistance program, Living in Communities (LINC), was created in September 2014 to help move families out of shelter and into stable housing. There are six different LINC programs, each targeted to a slightly different population, including families in shelter who are working full-time; identified as vulnerable; recently affected by domestic violence; have a senior or disabled member; as well as employed single adults in shelter and children in shelter who want to live with relatives. Priority is given to households that have lived in shelter the longest. Other

rental assistance programs include the City Family Eviction Prevention Supplement Program, the Special Exit and Prevention Supplement Program and the HOME Tenant Based Rental Assistance Program.

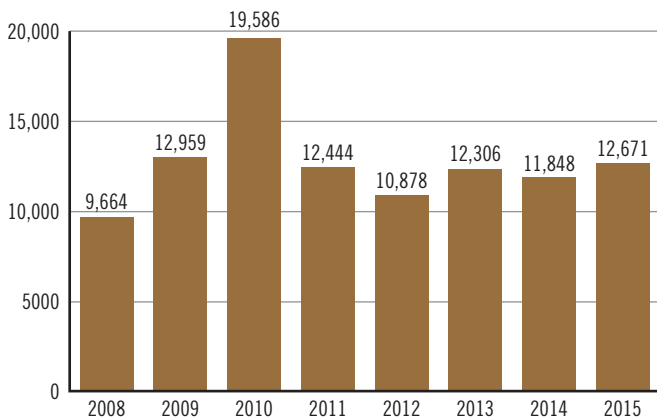
Trend data, based on data from New York City’s Department of Homeless Services ([www.nyc.gov.dhs](http://www.nyc.gov.dhs)), show a slightly different picture from that provided by the PIT counts. Data on new entrants (**Figure 18**) show that the number of families entering shelter each year steadily increased from fewer than 10,000 families in FY2008 to a high of 19,586 in FY2010. Since that time, the number of new families entering the shelter system each year has averaged around 12,000 a year. The decrease in new entrants has been attributed, in part, to the city’s prevention effort, HomeBase and diversion policies (Durham and Johnson, 2014).

Despite a recent stabilization of the number of new family entrants to the homeless system, the number served per month continues to rise. Using September as the signal month per year, **Figure 19** shows that the monthly number of families in shelter has steadily risen over the past eight years, with a low of 7,548 in FY2008 to 11,914 in FY2016.

Increases in the number served correlates with increases in families’ length of stay. Since January 2008, families’ length of stay in shelter has increased from an average of 324 days to an average of 430 days in FY2015. Decreases were experienced in FY2009 through FY2011, but the length of stay has increased between FY2011 and

FIGURE 18

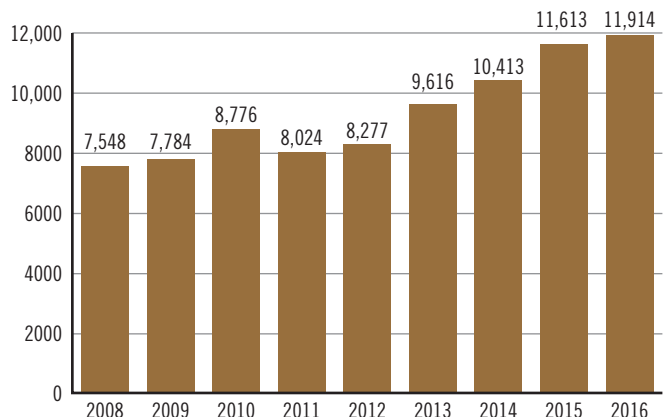
**Number of Families with Children Entering the NYC Shelter System**



Source: Data available on New York City’s Department of Homeless Services website

FIGURE 19

**Number of Family Households Served in NYC**



Source: Data available on New York City’s Department of Homeless Services website

FY2015, similar to what has been experienced in Boston and Massachusetts overall. (See **Figure 20**.)

According to the FY2014 and FY2015 Mayor’s Management Reports produced by DHS, average length of stay in shelter for both families and single adults increased due to the termination of subsidy programs as well as the ongoing need for more affordable housing. The LINC program is intended to help with moving families out of shelter and into stable housing more quickly.

Returns to shelter for families, measured as families who exited to permanent housing and returned within one year, have climbed in the last two fiscal years for which data are available. Between FY2008 and FY2012, the percentage of families returning to shelter was less than 5%. The percentage jumped to nearly 10% in FY2013 and was at a high of 16.5% in 2015 (see **Figure 21**). DHS attributed the increase in returns to greater numbers of families exiting to unsubsidized housing.

## Seattle/King County

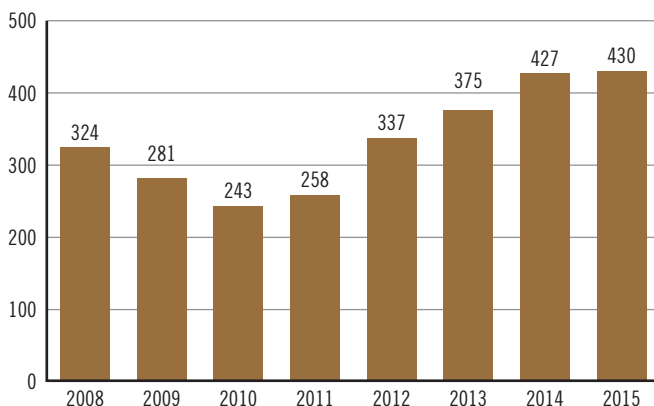
Seattle/King County’s homeless system is administered through the Continuum of Care operated through All Home (<http://allhomekc.org/>). The system has been undergoing transformation since 2012 (Rog, Lunn, Henderson and Greer, 2016), when it instituted a coordinated system for families receiving homeless assistance using a common assessment to identify a family’s needs and housing barriers. Over the past four years, the county has continued to refine its coordinated entry system, focusing on literally homeless families and

determining ways to most efficiently assess families and identify those most vulnerable, and determine housing placements based on vulnerability. It should be noted that through the coordinated entry system, Seattle/King County has determined the number of families needing shelter, including those that cannot be served in the system. Between July 1 and September 30, 2016, it was estimated that 1,172 families (1,052 of whom were unsheltered) were homeless and still awaiting shelter or housing (Roe and Thompkins, 2016). Therefore, when comparing the systems, we are comparing the numbers served through the systems, not necessarily the number who are experiencing homelessness.

In addition, in the last four years, the Seattle/King County system has broadened the assistance it provides beyond shelter and transitional housing to include diversion efforts before families enter shelter, rapid rehousing, permanent supportive housing and other housing with supports. There are currently 89 different homeless assistance programs across 33 agencies. Transitional housing, as noted, has been a prominent feature of the system since the 2000s. Although transitional housing units still account for nearly a third of the homeless assistance units available for families, the percentage and absolute number has decreased due to efforts to realign the units to other types of housing. Rapid rehousing, on the other hand, has become a prominent part of the assistance available, accounting for 30% of the units, up from 18% just a year ago.

FIGURE 20

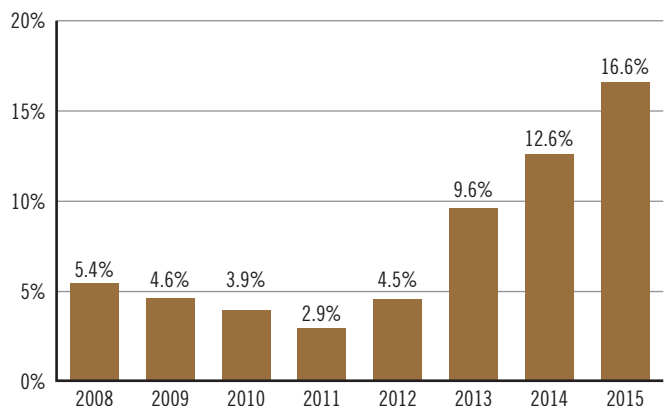
### Average Length of Stay in Days for NYC Homeless Shelters



Source: Data available on New York City’s Department of Homeless Services website

FIGURE 21

### Percent of Family Households Returning to Homelessness: NYC



Source: Data available on New York City’s Department of Homeless Services website



Data on families served in the system are available only for 2013 through 2015 and only for a few measures. Data are available on the number of families exiting to permanent housing, length of stay and the number of returns to the system after exiting to permanent housing. Data are not available, for example, on the numbers of families served over time.

The number of families exiting to permanent housing from the system has increased over the last three years (Figure 22) and, in turn, average length of stay in the system has decreased from a high of 307 days in 2013 to 273 days in 2015. Returns after exiting to permanent housing decreased from 9% in 2013 and have remained at 6% for two years. (See Figure 23.)

### Comparative Analysis

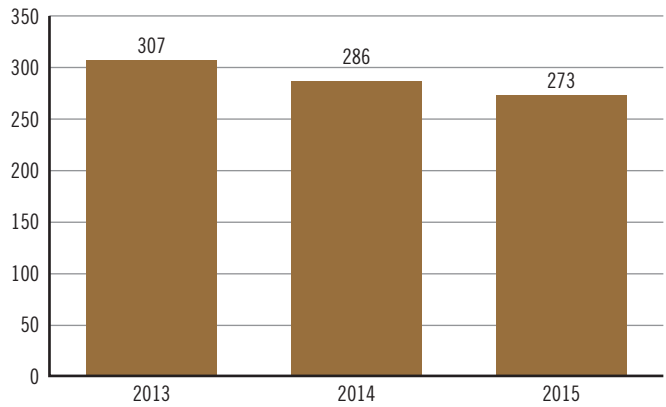
In many ways, the three communities compared in this section provide three different pictures of family homelessness and system responses over the last five to eight years, although there are areas of similarity. In New York City, as in Boston, there have been fluctuations in the number of new entrants over time, but the length of stay in shelter has continued to increase, causing continuing enrollments to increase. Both communities have long average lengths of stay, more than 14 months in New York City and approaching a year in Boston. These numbers suggest that a considerable portion of families, by virtue of being in shelter continuously for a year, would meet HUD’s chronic homelessness

designation. The NYC bottleneck is attributed in part to decreases in subsidized housing; in Boston, attributions are also made to housing market factors along with limited subsidies.

The trend data in Seattle/King County, although limited to three years, suggest that length of stay, at approximately 10 months in 2013, is decreasing (to approximately nine months in 2015). Evaluations are underway to examine the impact of the system reform. These are not yet complete but the decrease is likely due, in part, to multiple initiatives that have been instituted

FIGURE 23

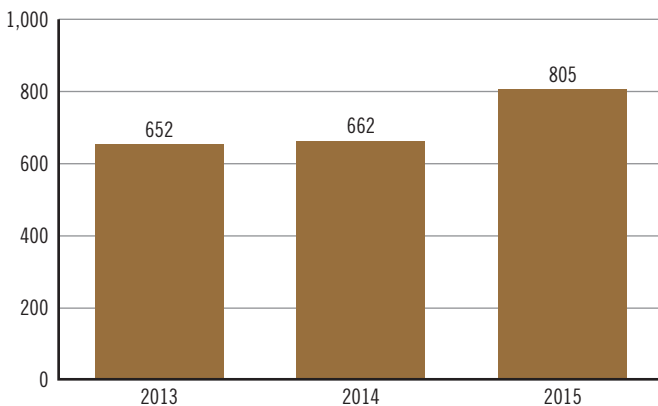
#### Average Days in Emergency Shelter and Transitional Housing in SKC



Source: Data available on Seattle/King County’s All Home website

FIGURE 22

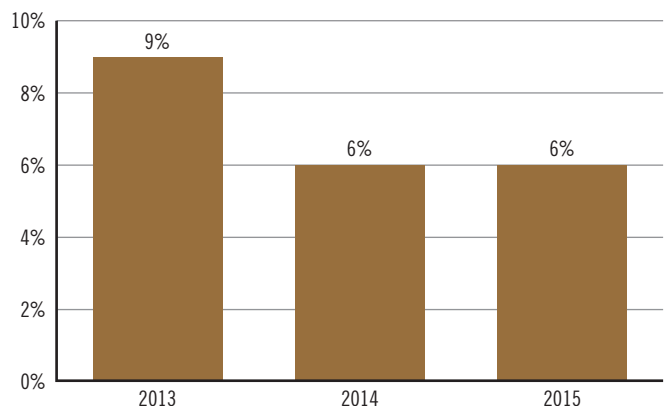
#### Number of Homeless Family Households Exiting to Permanent Housing in SKC



Source: Data available on Seattle/King County’s All Home website

FIGURE 24

#### Percent of Family Households Returning to the Homeless System (Two Years after Exit to Permanent Housing)



Source: Data available on Seattle/King County’s All Home website

since 2012, including efforts to rapidly rehouse families and decrease reliance on transitional housing. As the Housing Inventory Counts suggest, Seattle/King County has dedicated a greater percentage of its most recent homeless assistance to rapid rehousing (30%) than both New York City (0%) and Boston (1%). New York City has other housing resources, but they are not specifically labeled rapid rehousing.

Trends in returns to shelter are less clear and consistent across the three communities, with recent spikes in New York City and decreased or stable rates in both Boston and Seattle/King County. New York City's increase is attributed to fewer exits to subsidized housing; however, data are not available on the exit assistance status in all three communities to test this explanation. Recent data in Massachusetts indicate that 69% of the families leaving shelters exit with some type of housing assistance, with about 39% leaving with some type of subsidy or public housing. It is not clear whether this assistance helps families remain stably housed and avoid returning to the system.

The housing markets in all three communities are tight, with limited vacancies and limited affordable housing. Each city's economic status is stronger than the country's as a whole, making for competitive housing markets. The right to shelter may explain some of the increase in the numbers of families served in New York City and Boston, though the increase in numbers served in shelter in recent years in both communities appears to be explained more by increases in length of stay than by increases in new entrants. In Seattle/King County, data from the coordinated entry system suggest that the numbers experiencing homelessness continue to be greater than can be served with the capacity. However, the decrease in shelter stay duration in Seattle/King County may be having some effect on the number served at any given time in that system. Thus, the comparative analysis highlights the importance of reducing length of shelter stay, both to help families get back into housing and regain their lives in the community as well as to decrease the overall census in the shelters. Identifying and implementing the set of strategies that might be used to assist more families earlier in their shelter stays may be important, both for Boston and for Massachusetts as a whole.

## SECTION V.

# Summary, Conclusions and Implications

As noted in Section I, this study was guided by three main questions:

1. What are the trends in the population of families served through the Emergency Assistance (EA) program with respect to numbers served, demographic characteristics and family composition and tenure in and repeat use of the system?
2. To what extent do families who receive EA also receive assistance through other homeless assistance programs such as the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) program and HomeBASE?
3. How do the trends in homelessness in Massachusetts, especially Greater Boston, compare with those nationally and in other selected cities in the country?

In this section, we summarize the key study findings, discuss their implications and highlight gaps in data and knowledge that are important to fill in order for Massachusetts to gain a comprehensive picture of its system and what works in stemming homelessness among families.

## Summary of Trends and Their Comparison with Other Communities

The number of families receiving EA has more than doubled in the past nine years by all indicators examined: new entrants, continuing entrants and total number served. The growth is among the highest in the nation and the dominance of families among the homeless population is second only to New York City. Moreover, Massachusetts has experienced this increase in the population needing housing assistance at the same time that most states have experienced downward trends in the number of families experiencing homelessness. Although all states in the nation continue to struggle with homelessness, family homelessness in Massachusetts is somewhat out of sync with national trends, but consistent with New York City and to some degree with Seattle/King County, two areas with comparably high costs of living and tight, expensive housing markets. Encouraging recent data signal a decrease in the number

of new entrants into the homeless system: Both the Point-in-Time counts and HMIS note a decrease in the overall number of families experiencing homelessness for FY2016.

The relationship between the trends in new entrants and HomeBASE diversion of EA eligible families are suggestive and worth exploring. In three of the four years when diversion numbers are high, the number of new entrants is at its lowest. These data are cautiously encouraging in suggesting that families may be avoiding shelter, but they are far from definitive. It is important to continue to explore this relationship more closely, as well as to examine other factors that may influence the flow of new entrants.

The number of families returning to the system is decreasing. The decrease is small, but statistically

### Key Study Findings

- Since FY2008, Massachusetts has experienced one of the largest increases in family homelessness in the country, second only to New York City.
- Recent data suggest that the number of new entrants to the system as well as returns to shelter may be declining.
- Length of stay in shelter, however, continues to increase, with recent estimates averaging nearly a year state-wide and longer in Boston.
- Families struggling the most in both exiting shelter and staying outside the system tend to be larger in size and headed by a female who is African American and/or Hispanic.
- About half of the families in shelter also receive other homeless and housing assistance, including RAFT, HomeBASE and other assistance.

significant, and may relate to the extent to which families are receiving HomeBASE and other assistance upon exit.

Length of stay, however, continues to increase. The length of stay for families that entered in FY2013 is nearly a year long, cumulatively across all of their stays. Even when families that had only one episode are examined, the length of stay is still nearly a year, at 11 months (330 days). Longer lengths of stay suggest that families are having difficulty leaving shelter. In an earlier study conducted in Massachusetts by the authors (Weinreb, Rog and Henderson, 2010) between November 2006 and November 2007, families leaving with a housing subsidy stayed two months longer than those who left without a subsidy. Families reported waiting in shelter in hopes they would receive a subsidy.

Some families continue to struggle both in leaving shelter and in not returning. Other things being equal, families that have greater struggles now are those that have more family members and are headed by females of color. Younger families also are more likely to return to the system. Type of shelter and region matter as well: Families that enter hotels tend to stay longer in the system, likely due in part to their entering hotels first and then moving to one or more other types of shelter.

Boston, already noted as an unforgiving rental market for families who are impoverished as well as even for middle-income households, has the longest length of stay among the families who receive EA in that community compared to all other regions in the state. Even among temporary stayers across the state, the average time in shelter is near six months. Market forces in Boston and Massachusetts as a whole, like those in New York City and Seattle, are making it difficult for families to leave the shelter system on their own. Comparison with these two cities suggests that length of stay in the system has a large effect on the census of families served at any one time. Reducing the length of stay, therefore may significantly improve the system.

## Implications

The findings likely raise more questions than they answer, but they do provide some direction for policy and practice, as well as identify other data that would be helpful to have moving forward. The data suggest that focusing additional resources on larger families and those headed by younger females of color and Hispanic

origin may be important to help them leave shelter earlier and avoid returning. Although these families appear to be a priority for HomeBASE assistance, it is not clear when they are offered the assistance. Targeting families earlier in their shelter stays with rapid rehousing may help to decrease the longer shelter stays. Areas of focus to emphasize in order to help families leave shelter more quickly and with a greater chance of stability might include: understanding the resources a family has and how to build upon those (such as helping working families save money while in shelter); assessing job skills and how a family might benefit from job training; and more concentrated resources to help families locate housing in tight housing markets.

Overall, the growth in numbers of new entrants and longer length of stays suggest that a multipronged approach is needed to reduce the EA census. Although efforts are already in place to divert families from shelter as well as to rehouse families who are in shelter, both areas are likely to need more attention. Only half of the families exiting shelter, for example, receive HomeBASE assistance and that assistance is generally provided only following a long shelter stay. Increasing assistance to more families and earlier in the shelter stay may help to reduce the length of their stay.

## Knowledge and Data Gaps

It is important to note that only a few characteristics are now available to examine the trends in family homelessness over time. Therefore, it is possible that other family and context variables could help account for differences over time. For example, the Emergency Assistance data does not include data on the families' geographic location before receiving assistance, the type of housing they were residing in (assisted, market rate, doubled up, etc.), or their reasons for needing shelter. Data from the EA applications, which do contain this information, are not linked to enrollment data. Without these data being linked, we are unable to systematically examine whether families are placed within 20 miles of their communities of origin. The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has been able to conduct these analyses for only a limited pool of families. Being able to link application data to enrollment data would allow for a more systematic examination of families' placement in EA throughout the state and allow for data driven decisions about whether additional EA resources are needed and where in the state they should be located.

The Emergency Assistance data includes limited information on income, education level and employment status or histories for families in EA. Amplifying these data elements would provide an opportunity to investigate the economic barriers homeless families face and determine the resources some may need, and how to tailor supports to facilitate their exit into permanent, stable housing.

Additionally, Emergency Assistance data do not include information on families' exits from EA, including the type of place or community to which they exited or the type of assistance they received upon exit. DHCD has recently started to collect information on types of exit assistance received and the destination city, but this information is only available for families that exited after FY2014 and does not include the type of place (i.e., own apartment, someone else's apartment, another location) to which a family moves. These data would allow for a deeper understanding of families' experiences and may help guide the use of other types of assistance to stabilize families after EA.

Finally, the DHCD Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program data do not include demographic information about the recipients. More complete information on the families who receive these types of assistance would allow a more detailed examination of how these resources are being used both in place of and in conjunction with EA to stabilize and exit families.

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# Glossary

**American Community Survey (ACS)**—An annual ongoing statistical survey by the U.S. Census Bureau that collects information on demographics, jobs and occupations, educational attainment, veterans.

**City Family Eviction Prevention Supplement Program**—A program administered by New York City’s Department of Homeless Services that provides ongoing rental assistance for up to five years to families receiving Public Assistance to help prevent homelessness.

**Congregate shelter**—A type of shelter that provides multiple families with their own room and shared bathroom, kitchen and living areas.

**Continuum of Care**—A regional or local planning body that coordinates housing and services funding for homeless families and individuals. Continuums of Care represent communities of all kinds, including major cities, suburbs and rural areas, in all 50 states, plus D.C., Puerto Rico and Guam.

**Co-shelter**—A shelter consisting of an apartment in which two or three families live together with each family having its own bedroom and sharing the remainder of the apartment.

**Community of origin**—The community identified by an Emergency Assistance client as their home or preferred location. Massachusetts must place the individual/family within 20 miles of that community, or commit to moving them there as soon as possible should shelter space be unavailable at the onset of their emergency assistance.

**Department of Homeless Services (DHS)**—New York City’s homeless services agency responsible for administering shelter and other homeless assistance programs.

**Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD)**—The housing and community development agency in Massachusetts responsible for administering Emergency Assistance and other homeless assistance programs.

**Diversion**—Financial and case management assistance that is provided to Emergency Assistance-eligible households seeking shelter, which can be used to preserve their current housing or help them find new housing and avoid entering shelter.

**Emergency Assistance (EA)**—The Massachusetts state program that provides homeless families with children with emergency shelter and help finding housing.

**Emergency Solutions Grant Program (ESG)**—A federal program that provides funds to states to address homelessness in four key areas: street outreach, emergency shelter, homelessness prevention and rapid housing; formerly known as the Emergency Shelter Grants program.

**Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS)**—Massachusetts state agency in charge of health and human service programs and policy development.

**Executive Office of Housing and Economic Developments (EOHED)**—Massachusetts state organization responsible for aligning the Commonwealth’s housing and economic development agencies to coordinate policies and programs in community leadership, business development and job creation.

**FLEX**—Flexible funds, administered by DHCD in FY2009 and FY2011, for time-limited subsidies for families in shelter used to help defray the costs of obtaining housing.

**HomeBASE**—A flexible rapid rehousing option administered by nonprofit agencies contracted with DHCD that can be used for either diversion in lieu of shelter or stabilization following shelter.

**HOME Tenant Based Rental Assistance Program**—A federal program that administers rental subsidies to help individual households afford housing costs such as rent and security deposits.

**Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)**—A local information technology system used to collect client-level data on the characteristics, service needs and homeless service receipt of homeless individuals and families.



**Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP)**—A component of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 that provided financial assistance and services to prevent individuals and families from becoming homeless and to help those who are experiencing homelessness to be quickly re-housed and stabilized.

**Housing Inventory Count (HIC)**—A point-in-time inventory of provider programs within a Continuum of Care that tallies the number of beds and units available on the night designated for the count by program type.

**Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness (ICHH)**—Convened by Governor Baker in October of 2015 to coordinate Massachusetts state policy and working relationships among state, local and nonprofit agencies that work to remedy and prevent homelessness.

**Leading the Way Home BHA**—A program run by the Boston Housing Authority, which provides rental assistance and 18 months of support services to families in emergency shelters.

**Living in Communities (LINC)**—A limited rental assistance program for low-income families and single adults living in homeless or domestic violence shelters in New York City.

**Massachusetts Voucher Rental Program (MVRP)**—A program that provides both tenant- and project-based rental subsidies to low-income families and individuals in Massachusetts.

**Point in Time (PIT)**—An annual national count of homeless persons on a single night in January conducted by a set of volunteers canvassing to identify individuals living on the streets and other outdoor areas as well as in shelters within a specified geographic area.

**Prevention**—Assistance that provides financial support and services to aid households in preserving their current housing situation when they experience some financial instability.

**Rapid rehousing**—An intervention that provides housing relocation and stabilization services and time limited rental assistance to help individuals or families exit homelessness and quickly return to permanent housing.

**Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT)**—Massachusetts' largest homelessness and eviction prevention program, which provides up to

\$4,000 in financial assistance over a 12-month period, for expenses such as moving costs, rent and utility arrears, utility bills, security deposits, utility startup costs, first/last month's rent and furniture.

**Right to shelter**—A mandate that requires a state or municipality to provide temporary emergency shelter to every man, woman and child who is eligible for services, every night.

**Scattered-site shelters**—A type of shelter that consists of apartments in the community rented by the state for homeless families.

**Section 8**—A common name for the Housing Choice Voucher Program, which is a federally funded, locally administered rental assistance program that helps low-income families, the elderly and the disabled afford decent, safe housing in the private market.

**Sound Families Initiative**—An eight-year, \$40 million program launched in 2000, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, aimed at tripling the amount of available transitional housing in Washington State's three most populous counties and pairing it with support services to address family homelessness.

**Special Exit and Prevention Supplement Program**—A program administered by New York City's DHS intended to help eligible individual adults and adult families (families without children) at risk of entry to shelter and those already in shelter to secure permanent housing.

**Supportive Housing Program (SHP)**—A federal grant program for housing and supportive services to assist homeless persons in the transition from the streets and shelters to permanent housing and self-sufficiency.

**Toolbox**—A program in Massachusetts, available in FY2006–2010 that targeted cash assistance and follow-up case management services to EA-eligible families to avoid shelter and stay in their home, or exit shelter to a new home.

**United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)**—The federal department that administers programs that provide housing and community development assistance.

# Endnotes

1. Each payment received within RAFT or HomeBASE is considered a disbursement. A single enrollment period of the program often includes multiple disbursements.
2. The Point-in-Time (PIT) count, conducted by each local HUD Continuum of Care, is an annual count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals on a single night in January.
3. Region was determined based on location of EA shelter or hotel. Boston includes all locations within the city limits of Boston. North includes locations in North Shore and north suburbs. South includes South Shore, south suburbs, South Coast and Cape Cod/Islands. Central is anything east of the Pioneer Valley and west of Route 495. West is the Pioneer Valley and further west.
4. Data from EA Placement Forms on reasons for homelessness are available prior to FY2014; however, analyses were limited to FY2014–2016 because eligibility criteria for EA changed in the fall of 2013.
5. FY14 was the only year when families could enter the system with HomeBASE ending as their reason.
6. Financial information was missing or considered questionable for less than one percent in either group.



