

Asheville's Quick & Easy Cost-Benefits Analysis

In 2002 Asheville service providers documented over 2000 unduplicated homeless people. Point in time counts consistently showed over 500 people. Service providers also documented over 200 persons who met the definition of chronically homeless.

The sample group:

Our sample was made up of 19 persons who were readily identifiable by the local police department. They were selected by the Asheville Police Department (APD) because officers had so many interactions with this group that they could literally name them one by one, from memory. As a result, selecting the sample group was comparatively easy. By reviewing birth certificates it was also documented that the sample group had a higher rate of being native to Asheville than does the broader Asheville community.

Methodology:

Once the group was selected the APD searched their records and identified that in 2001-2002 the Department had arrested these individuals, combined, over 800 times. The Department agreed to provide a rough estimate of the costs to their Department and the accompanying jail costs.

Since the criminal justice system can provide identifying information, we were able to obtain names and social security numbers of the sample population from the APD. We sent these names to the largest hospital in our region and asked the hospital to provide us with aggregate figures of how much money the hospital had spent on the same individuals during the same 24 months. The hospital provided no specific information about any individual.

Results:

By combining these two figures we documented that our community was paying over \$1200 per person, per month, for two years in tax funded interventions. Our analysis stopped there since the figure was compelling. We did not add in mental health, substance abuse, ambulance, shelter, long-term rehabilitation, police time not associated with an arrest, or any other public costs.

Other:

Asheville has a thriving, revitalized downtown community. One result of this success is that, likely, there is more interaction between "housed" and homeless people than in other communities of similar size. This may contribute to a higher arrest rate for homeless people exhibiting certain behaviors than their counterparts in other cities would see. However, we selected this group because of the ease of identifying our sample population. By beginning with the criminal justice system we were able to gather information more quickly because of the different standards for privacy and confidentiality.

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