

ECONOMY BYTES

Doubled Up in the United States

The recent economic crisis has led policymakers, researchers, and advocates alike to ask: how many people are homeless due to the recession? In response, the National Alliance to End Homelessness is releasing a series of briefs on various economic indicators and their relationship to homelessness.

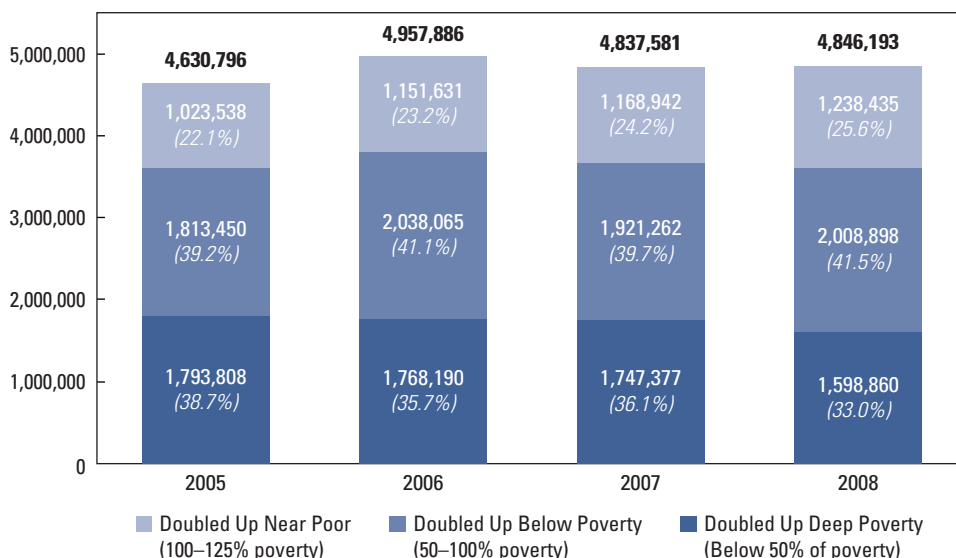
In this first in the series, we focus on the phenomenon of “doubling up.” Doubling up is defined in this brief as an individual or family living in a housing unit with extended family, friends, and other non-relatives due to economic hardship, earning no more than 125 percent of the federal poverty level.¹ While not all people who are doubled up become homeless, for many this event serves as a precursor. According to the 2008 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR), approximately 46 percent of people who were not homeless before accessing shelter services spent the previous night at the home of a friend or family member.² This represents an increase over 2007, and it is likely that this number reported for 2009 will be higher due to the recession. In 2009, the Homeless Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act expanded the definition of homelessness to include some doubled up families, making them eligible for homeless assistance services. Understanding the extent of the problem will help understand the amount of resources needed to ameliorate it. This brief will discuss the national estimates of doubling up between 2005 and 2008, as well as some household characteristics of this population.

Approximately 5 percent more people doubled up in 2008 than did in 2005.

Between 2005 and 2008 the number of doubled up people in the United States increased by over 215,000 (5 percent) from 4,630,796³ to 4,846,193. While all doubled up people are economically vulnerable, earning no more than 125 percent of the poverty level, a large majority of this population is poor, earning less than 100 percent, or very poor, earning less than 50 percent of the poverty level. Figure 1 shows the doubled up population between 2005 and 2008 by poverty status.

While clear that the majority of doubled up people are living below the poverty line, a growing number of people just above the poverty line are doubling up. Between 2005 and 2008, the number of doubled up people earning between 100 and 125 percent of the poverty line (near poor) grew by 21 percent as the number of people below the poverty line did not change.

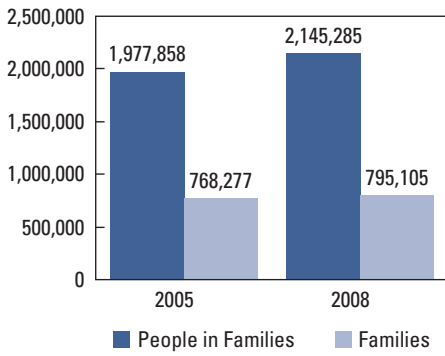
FIGURE 1 Doubled Up in the United States by Poverty Status



More families doubled up in 2008 than did in 2005.

A growing share of the doubled up population are people in families. Approximately 2,135,000 people in just fewer than 800,000 families were doubled up in 2008. This represents an 8.5 percent increase in the number of people in families over 2005, and a 3.5 percent increase in the number of family units. The faster rate of change in the number of people in families than family units indicates a growth in the doubled up family size. During the same time period, the number of doubled up individuals grew only modestly, with less than two percent more individuals doubling up in 2008 than 2005. While

**FIGURE 2 Doubled Up Families
2005 and 2008**



there are still more singles than there are families doubling up, there is a clear shift. In 2005, families made up 42.7 percent of this population which increased to 44.2 percent in 2008.

More doubled up households are severely housing cost burdened.

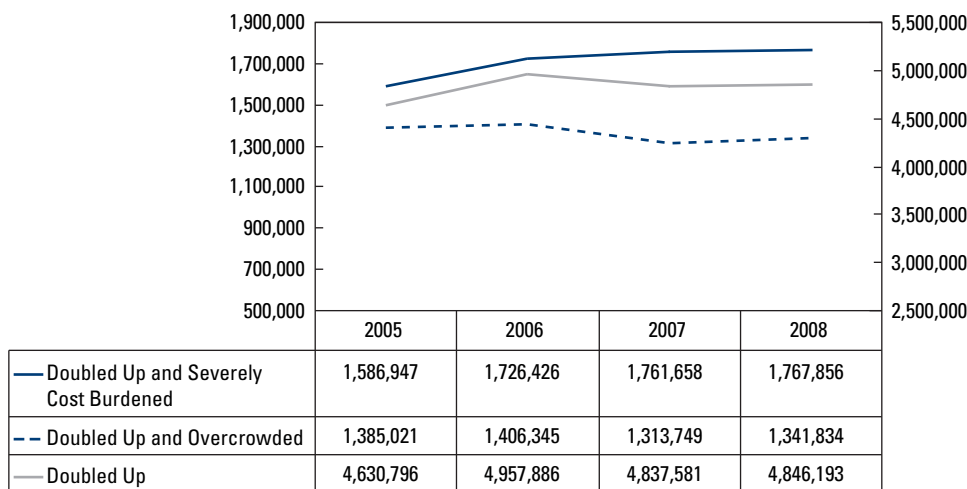
Severe housing cost burden, defined by a household paying more than 50 percent of its income for housing costs, results in housing instability.⁴ Doubling up with households that already show signs of housing instability likely increases the risk of homelessness for a segment of this population. However, it could also mean that households are “co-housing,” combining their limited resources to keep from becoming homeless. In both circumstances there exists economic and housing instability, and it is growing. Between 2005 and 2008 the number of doubled up people living with severely cost burdened households increased by 11 percent. Further, the percent of all doubled up people living with severely cost burdened households increased from 34.2 percent in 2005 to 36.4 percent in 2008. Overcrowding in these households is relatively common.⁵ In 2008, 22 percent of the 1.8 million people doubling up in severely

cost burdened housing units were also living in overcrowded conditions.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of doubled up people in families become homeless. This increase in the doubled up population, therefore, is cause for concern as it points to a growing demand for assistance. The recent expansion of the definition of homelessness to include some doubled up people has added implications for communities who will now serve them through their homeless assistance system. Information on the size and characteristics of this population are needed to understand the resources required to address this growing problem.

A more in-depth examination of the doubled up population will be included in an upcoming paper by the Homelessness Research Institute.

FIGURE 3 Doubled Up, Severely Cost Burdened, Overcrowded 2005–2008



¹ To estimate the doubled up population, we used the definition put forth in the National Alliance to End Homelessness “Data Snapshot: Doubled up in the United States,” with a few refinements. First, we removed from the definition grandchildren who are living with (and under the guardianship of) their grandparents. Additionally, our previous definition excluded all adult children of the head of household. This update includes those adult children living with a parent who are below the poverty line and who have children with them. We also increased the income to include those considered “near poor” at 125% of the federal poverty level or below.

² Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2008 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress.

³ The 2005 estimate is higher than was previously identified in the “Data Snapshot: Doubled up in the United States,” due to the refinements to the definition outlined in endnote 1.

⁴ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “Decade of Neglect has Weakened Federal Low Income Housing Programs: New Resources Required to Meet the Growing Need.” <http://www.cbpp.org/files/2-24-09hous.pdf>

⁵ “Overcrowding,” defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, occurs when the number of people in a household exceeds the total number of rooms.