



Sampling the Extreme Poor: Notes from a Systematic and Venue-Based Study

Robert Francis and Elizabeth Talbert
 The Poverty & Inequality Research Lab
 Johns Hopkins University
 April 2015

EXTREME POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES

Our central hypothesis is that a growing number of American families have incomes so low that the difficulties of their living situations are masked by studies that treat the poor as a homogeneous group. A recent study by Edin and Shaefer (2013) suggests that about one-fifth of all poor households with children—and about one-fifth of all poor children—live at the extreme income threshold of only two dollars of cash income per person per day. They refer to this income level as “extreme poverty.” For the purposes of this study, we define extreme poverty as a cash income of no more than 25% of the federal poverty line, which is currently \$20,090 for a family of three. Table 1 provides additional detail about measurements of poverty and extreme poverty.

Table 1. Measures of Poverty and Extreme Poverty by Household Size

Household Size	2015 Federal Poverty Line (48 Contiguous States and DC)	Annual Gross Income at 25% of the FPL	Monthly Gross Income at 25% of the FPL	Dollars per Person per Day at 25% of the FPL
1	\$11,770	\$2,942.50	\$245.21	\$8.06
2	\$15,930	\$3,982.50	\$331.88	\$5.45
3	\$20,090	\$5,022.50	\$418.54	\$4.59
4	\$24,250	\$6,062.50	\$505.21	\$4.15
5	\$28,410	\$7,102.50	\$591.88	\$3.89
6	\$32,570	\$8,142.50	\$678.54	\$3.72
7	\$36,730	\$9,182.50	\$765.21	\$3.59
8	\$40,890	\$10,222.50	\$851.88	\$3.50

The growth in extreme poverty is the result of several factors, including changes to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program as part of welfare reform in the 1990s (Edin and Shaefer 2015). The virtual demise of TANF, combined with the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and other policy changes, has ushered in an era of an employment-based safety net. As economist Robert Moffitt (2015) has demonstrated, while social welfare expenditures have increased in recent years, the proportion of that spending going to those below 50 percent of the poverty line has decreased. This project set out to demonstrate that a systematic sampling of this population in extreme poverty was possible. Being able to find and talk with these families is necessary to understand the diverse dynamics of poverty in the United States.

METHODOLOGY

This project was conducted in two field sites in Maryland: Baltimore City and Somerset County. These sites were chosen to provide one urban and one rural site with high poverty rates. The research team consisted of two supervising professors (Drs. Andrew Cherlin and Kathryn Edin), two doctoral students (Talbert and Francis), and seven research assistants, five of whom were undergraduates and two of whom were recent graduates.



The goal of the study was to test two different sampling methods—random sampling and venue-based sampling—in hopes of reaching the target population: black, white, and Hispanic families with children between the ages of 3 and 15 who have cash incomes of less than 25 percent of the federal poverty line. For the random sample, we identified one black, one white, and one Hispanic high-poverty Census block group in the urban site, and one black and one white high-poverty Census block group in the rural site. (There were no Census block groups in the rural site with a plurality of Latinos.) We purchased a list of random address

in these block groups and then randomly subsampled from these lists. In total, the subsample consisted of 403 addresses: 300 from the three urban block groups (100 each) and 103 from the rural block groups (52 from one, 51 from the other). The team visited all 403 addresses, seeking to screen each household for study eligibility. Tables 2 and 3 list selected demographics for the urban and rural sites.



Table 2. Urban Sites and Characteristics, Random Sample

Urban #1	Urban #2	Urban #3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 75% of households in poverty • 100% African American 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 44% of households in poverty • 80% white 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25% of households in poverty • 44% Hispanic

Table 3. Rural Sites and Characteristics, Random Sample

Rural #1	Rural #2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35% of households in poverty • 83% African American 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 42% of households in poverty • 93% white

For the venue-based method of sampling, we identified venues that served the Census block groups chosen for the random sample. Eventually, we broadened our search for venues, particularly in the urban site, to include venues outside of the initial Census block groups. This was done once we realized that the Census block groups chosen for the random sample had limited venues that would work for the venue-based sample. In some venues, we did time interval screening, in which researchers screened every person to visit the venue in a given time interval. In other cases, the venue-based screening was more fluid and involved talking to people as there was opportunity. In a few cases, researchers at a venue made an announcement about the study to those present and invited those who thought they fit the criteria to speak with the researchers further.

The screening questionnaire used for both the random sample and the venue-based sample consisted of eight questions designed to determine eligibility for the study. The first two questions established if the person was the head of the household and whether or not children in the desired age range (3-15) were present. If the answer was negative to either of these questions, the researcher told the person the household was not eligible and thanked him or her for their time. If the person was the head of the household (or an adult in the household with knowledge of the household’s situation) and kids of the specified age were present, the researcher proceeded with six additional questions designed to be a proxy for extreme poverty. Questions asked about recent homelessness, health problems, the receipt of food assistance, if the household had trouble making ends meet, and so on. We began the study by requiring three “preferred” answers to the hardship questions to be eligible for the study, but we quickly realized that this was too selective and changed the protocol to just one “preferred” response. Thus, a household screened into the interview portion of the study if there was an adult in the household who could speak to the situation there; there were any children between ages 3 and 15; and the respondent indicated in any way that the household was struggling financially. Respondents who participated in the in-depth interview were given \$25 in cash or a gift card.

BALTIMORE CITY, MARYLAND

Baltimore City (pop. 622,793) comprises its own county in the state of Maryland and has the highest population density in the state, with 7,672 people per square mile. As the major population center in the state of Maryland, Baltimore City faces many of the issues of American post-industrial cities, including lack of affordable housing, high unemployment amongst the poorest residents, residential segregation, and stark income inequality. Though the state of Maryland as a whole grew almost 2% in population between 2010 and 2012, Baltimore City saw only a 0.1% growth in its population. Baltimore City is 63.7% African American, 29.6% white, and 4.2% of Hispanic ethnicity.



Baltimore City has the second highest poverty rate (24.2%) in the state and also has the second highest crime rate, with 18.2 violent crimes per 1,000 people. The 2010-2014 median household income in Baltimore city was \$41,819, about 56% of the median income for the state of Maryland as a whole (\$74,149). Eighty-six percent of Baltimore City public school students receive free or reduced lunch. Between 2006 and 2011, Baltimore City lost 2.6% of its full- and part-time jobs.

The three Census block groups chosen for this study were all at least 25% poor and included one completely black block group, one majority white block group, and one plurality Hispanic block group.

SOMERSET COUNTY, MARYLAND

Somerset County (pop. 25,859) is the second least populated county in the state of Maryland with the fourth lowest population density (83 people per square mile). It has no towns with a year round population larger than 3, 500, and it is in a largely rural part of the state – the Delmarva Peninsula – that is also physically and culturally distant from the state’s major population centers. Somerset County is one of only six of Maryland’s twenty-four counties to lose population between 2010 and 2012. The county residents are 51.0% non-Hispanic white and 42.8% African American.



Somerset County is the poorest county in Maryland with a poverty rate of 25.5%, over a full percentage point higher than Baltimore City. The median household income from 2009-2013 was \$36,716, over \$5,000 less than Baltimore City and less than half of the state median income. Sixty-one percent (61.0%) of households had incomes under \$50,000 in 2009, compared with 35.3% for the state of Maryland and 48.7% for the United States as a whole. The rate of students receiving free and reduced price lunches in Somerset County was 73% in 2014, which is the second highest rate in the state after Baltimore City (86%). Somerset County posted the greatest job loss of any Maryland county by percent change between 2006 and 2011, losing 6.6% of its full and part-time jobs during that span.

The two Census block groups chosen for this study were both at least 35% poor and included one majority black block group and one majority white block group. The documented Latino population in the county is small, although there is a history of migrant labor in the area. The random sample yielded two Latino households, one of which qualified to be interviewed.

SHARON, 26

Cash income of 14.6% of FPL

“Life sucks, kid.”

Sharon’s smile is the first sign of hardship in her life, and, perhaps, of dubious choices she has made: her wide grin reveals a mouth full of worn, brown nubs. Yet she is unabashed, energetic, and friendly. She is 26 years old, though she

looks older. A white mother of one, she is four-and-a-half months pregnant with a girl. Lacking a car in a small town without much public transportation, Sharon rarely leaves her apartment. She is starved for company, and happy to bend the ear of anyone who happens by, although such unannounced visitors are rare. She prefers to stand as she talks, a sign of excessive nervous energy or maybe the fact that there is only one place to sit in her living room, a well-worn love seat.

Sharon has had even less reason to leave her apartment lately being that she has not worked in almost a year. Altogether, she manages to bring in cash income of \$245 a month between child support and a utilities rebate, but this still leaves her below 25 percent of the federal poverty line for a family of two—soon to be three. Sharon makes ends meet largely because she pays no rent thanks to her subsidized apartment, and she has the help of her live-in boyfriend. Stable for now, a lot is riding on her ability to keep ahold of her subsidized unit and her relationship.

Her parents, homeless at one point (“sleeping in a car,” says Sharon), could not afford to care for her: “they were struggling; they were barely able to keep food in their mouths.” So Sharon was sent to live with her grandparents, who she describes in the worst possible terms: abusive, alcoholic, overly protective, and actively working to turn her against her parents. Diagnosed with a number of conditions as a child (“bipolar, depressive, anxiety”), Sharon says that “by the time I was seventeen, I was on over maybe six hundred different medications.” She blames her grandmother, claiming that she “liked to keep me doped up because [I never sat still].” She describes her upbringing as “very lonely.”

Sharon’s grandmother died when she was thirteen (“I was actually glad she died,” says Sharon), which sent her back to her parents, with whom she has lived on-and-off even into adulthood. None among her parents and grandparents had more than a high school diploma. Sharon did not even make it that far, failing to graduate high school. She has gone back to get her GED at least once, but she has yet to finish. She says she is bad at math, and besides, she doesn’t understand why she needs college or even a GED to do what she ultimately wants to do, which is open her own restaurant.

Sharon describes the difficulties of her childhood in level, unemotional terms, although she had no problem using colorful language about her past. Unfortunately, even with the difficulties she faced under her grandmother’s care, there were further troubles yet to come. She married, only to learn the worst about her husband: “I left him because I found out he was, he had been molesting his niece and some of her little friends. And had raped a couple of my girlfriends that we hung out with on a regular basis back when we were dating [as] teenagers. Yeah, so... it took me almost a year for me to be able to scrub it off me, I kind of felt responsible, because, how’d I not know that, you know? H-how do you not know that? How do you not know your husband’s going and doing these things?”

With her husband in jail, Sharon began seeing the man who became the father of her son, but this relationship also turned abusive. Just a two weeks after getting pregnant, Sharon says her boyfriend began to show “his not so nice side.” She was with him on-and-off for years before she finally ended it for good. Sharon moved back in with her mom for a few months, until a family friend, who ran an apartment complex, cut her a break on some of the entrance costs and got her in.

Given her previous living arrangements, which included a stint in a house with 12 people while her son was still an infant, the relative quiet of Sharon’s current apartment took some getting used to. The unit, saturated with the smell of cigarettes, is spartan but tidy. A tube television sits on an entertainment center, and a couch sits tipped up on its side. There is a small desk and chair for her five-year old son, who Sharon calls her “little Doctor Phil” because he makes excuses for the kids who bully him: “Mommy, they were never shown any love, it’s not their fault, they try to hit me and pick on me. Their mommy doesn’t love them.” At this moment, her son is fascinated with a small snapping turtle that he loves to let roam across the apartment’s carpeted floor.

Although not working now, Sharon has been working on and off since she was thirteen: at a race track (first taking tickets and then as a security guard), at a variety of restaurants, and cleaning vacant and foreclosed houses. The cleaning work, which was her most recent job, was for a company owned by her aunt. “I was going into these foreclosed homes, some of them falling down, um, walking through attics, had my foot go through a few floors,” says Sharon. “Um, the

mold and stuff like that didn't need to be [near it]. Um, me and my cousin, which is her daughter were in this one house, and there was freaking squatters in the house.” Sharon quit after just a few months. That was almost a year ago, and since then Sharon has been babysitting, although the work is unpredictable: she can go several months without a job and then work every day in a single week.

Sharon is relatively well-subscribed to public benefits. She receives WIC, SNAP, Medicaid, and subsidized housing. Yet she draws the line at welfare: “I was only on a TCA long enough to get in here and then I stopped it because I didn't want the assistance. It's bad enough they're feeding us. That's kind of how I feel about it, I feel like a freeloader. And I'm not, I'm a hard worker, I always work, work, work, work, work.” Yet despite her claims about work, Sharon's true safety net is her boyfriend, who she has been with for two years. He stays at her place often but is not on the lease and still pays rent to his parents. He works mostly for tips at a car wash in a town about thirty minutes away by bus. Sharon says he helps her as needed, but they do not have a formal arrangement.

Sharon's sense of energy and optimism is encouraging, especially given all she has experienced. “I'm rich in spirit, people,” she says. “[W]e got a little bit, but we're happy.” She is grateful for moments of grace, like when her upstairs neighbors invites her and her son for dinner. And she also tries to do her own small but special gestures, like spending the three dollars for fresh strawberries for her son. (“I got him a box of strawberries for his birthday and he thinks it's the greatest birthday present in the world”). But Sharon is no Pollyanna, nor is she a pushover. She is quick to rehearse the indignities, large and small, that have marked her life. Like most of the extreme poor, Sharon's aspirations are modest. She would like a place that has a bedroom for her daughter who's on the way and more of a yard for her son. In the past she imagined a future that involved fixing cars, but she says now that cars are so computerized, they are beyond her. Her current dream is to have a restaurant, based on her love of food and ability to turn leftovers into something good.

Sharon's outlook might be well-summarized by a short diatribe she offered her young son: “Yeah, the world's not all poop and sprinkles, you know, like it's gonna be messed up, at points in time, life sucks. You're not gonna get what you want. Things aren't gonna happen the way you want them to. Yes, you can be anything you want to be, but there's sacrifices and choices that you're gonna have to make. It's gonna be the opposite of the way your demeanor is, and the way who you are as a person you're gonna have to make choices you're not gonna wanna make. Life sucks, kid. Love you, be a kid as long as you can, because life sucks, kid.”

TAMEKA, 33

Cash income of 14.8% of the FPL

“I could have done better with my life, you know, but I didn't.”

Tameka cannot conceal her disappointment when she talks about her life. She is 33 years old, lives with her 13-year old daughter in a pleasant townhome in a small Maryland town, and she thinks she could have done better. Raised by working, middle-class parents, she feels like she “messed up” by not going from high school to college. “My dad was in the military,” says Tameka, “so I'm different than I would say most black girls because I had a little bit more of an opportunity to succeed just because my father stayed on me.”

Tameka has positive memories of her childhood. Because of her father's military career, she lived all over the world growing up, including Italy, Germany, England, Florida, and Oklahoma. Her parents married young and are still together. Yet it was also Tameka's strict upbringing—she did not get along with her parents “because of their strong Christian background”—that drove Tameka to move in with her boyfriend at eighteen. She was pregnant at twenty and a mom by twenty-one. Her boyfriend had a good factory job, but unfortunately, he was also abusive: “he punched, I'm talkin' like punched me in the face, kicked me in the stomach when I was pregnant, everything.”

Desperate to leave the situation, Tameka returned home to live with her parents, who took her in. But some of Tameka's habits, particularly her smoking, were eventually too much for her parents to handle, and Tameka found herself with a newborn baby and no place to go. “She [her daughter] was like three months then, and I was homeless for a while.”

After living with a friend for a time, Tameka eventually moved in with another boyfriend. She admits going “from job to job to job to job” in those years because she would not show up to work on time. And while relationships provided some relief, “it was basically a series from bad relationship to bad relationship.” Today, she has sworn off relationships to focus on her daughter, although she has a “friend” in Baltimore with whom she talks every day. She says this protective reaction about her daughter stems from childhood: “I was molested when I was ten by an uncle so I don't, I'm very leery on that, like having men around her, it, it's just, I have to protect her. So, I just choose not to have anyone around her.”

Tameka spent four years in public housing, and she jumped at the chance to move into her current place, where she has been for eight years. She has one of the few subsidized units in the complex, which means she always pays just one-third of whatever income she makes, no matter how large or small. While she initially saw this move as an improvement, she thinks the complex has gone downhill since she moved in. As Tameka puts it, no one is getting shot, but people play dice and do drug deals, play loud music at all hours, and young people sit outside in their cars drinking, even early in the morning.

Tameka started to cook at an early age, and most of her jobs have been in food service. Most recently, she worked for three years as a cake decorator at Food Lion supermarket (“I absolutely loved it”) and then eight months wrapping meat at Sam’s Club, a job that ended about seven months ago. She quit the job at Sam’s Club, citing conflict with her boss and the unrealistic demands of the work: “I never got my breaks on time, never got my lunch on time and it was just like, I didn’t feel appreciated.”

It was after quitting Sam’s Club that she drew Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA) for the first time. In her search for new work, she spent two weeks at a poultry processing facility before deciding it was not for her. After a few months, she got two jobs at the same time: in customer service at Comcast through a temp agency, and as a part-time cook at a nursing home. The former job brought in about \$350 per week, and the latter about \$200 a month. But almost as quickly as she got those jobs, she lost them. At the Comcast job, Tameka came to work one morning to find herself locked out of the computer; the temporary contract had ended without a word. Tameka was upset because she thought she had a rapport with her boss: “I felt like we always had this relationship where we could talk and you know you, I felt like she should have told me.” She feels like she was fired. It was all the more disappointing because she hoped they would bring her on permanently.

Faced with the unexpected end to one job, Tameka naturally called her other employer, the nursing home, for more hours. However, when she called, she was told she had missed work, which was news to Tameka. “I'm thinkin' in my head, I just lost one job, why would I not show up to work.” According to Tameka, there was some mix up, but the end result was that she lost that job as well, just a day after losing Comcast. “So imagine,” says Tameka, “going from making three-fifty a week and about a hundred to about two-hundred every other week, to nothing.”

It was this convergence of losing two jobs at once that threw Tameka and her daughter into an almost cashless existence. Without any work and her application for TCA pending, Tameka’s only cash income for the past month has been \$49 a week in court-ordered child support. Asked if she has any savings, Tameka chuckles and says, “Savings, what is that?” She is now two months behind on her \$121-a-month car payment, and her car insurance has lapsed. She is extremely fortunate to live in a unit whose rent is adjusted to her income, so her rent is currently only \$65 for a unit that would be close to \$1,000 at market rate. Tameka thinks her cable and internet service will be turned off any day. Her \$291 a month in SNAP benefits helps stretch her food budget, and she was also able to reduce the cost of her phone by moving her daughter to her mother’s plan and getting a less expensive plan for herself.

The good news for Tameka and her daughter is that Tameka has shown an ability to rebound. In fact, she was just offered a full-time cooking job at a chicken plant for \$9 an hour, although it is a long drive from home, which means spending more money for gas. Tameka calls cooking “my calling,” and she once took some culinary classes until a relationship got in the way. Her friends have encouraged her to go back to school, but Tameka says, “when you have a child and there's just you, your main focus really has to be on working and paying the bills.” To add another

complication, she was overpaid unemployment benefits in the past, so there is no joy at tax time. Owing almost two thousand dollars, her state tax refunds are garnished to pay the debt.

Knowing the advantages she had as a child, Tameka blames herself for how things have turned out: “I have excellent parents. It’s like, it’s kinda my fault that I kinda ended up this way.” Looking to the future, Tameka would eventually like to earn her associate’s degree and open a catering business or restaurant. But most of her focus on the future concerns her daughter, who is entering eighth grade. Influenced by Tameka’s father’s military service, her daughter wants to be a doctor in the Air Force, although she struggles in math. Tameka thinks her daughter will finish high school and go to college, correcting the biggest mistake she says she made. But as for her life, she is disappointed: “I feel like I could have done better with my life, you know, but I didn’t.”

RESULTS

The random sample of 403 addresses yielded 38 interviews, 26 from the urban site and 12 from the rural site. The venue-based recruitment added another 5 interviews from the urban site and one interview from the rural site, although it turned out that one of those 5 interviews from the urban site was with someone without qualifying children. In total, this project—between the two different sampling methods—resulted in in-depth interviews with 44 people who the research team believed might qualify as extremely poor. However, upon completing the interviews, only 3 of the interviewed families had cash incomes below 25 percent of the poverty line. We discuss implications of these findings in the conclusions section below. But first, a bit more about the results.

Table 4 shows the yield rates from the random sample. It was possible to approach 389 of the 403 randomly selected addresses. Of the 14 addresses not approached, some did not physically exist; some were university-owned student housing; and some were unable to be approached by the researchers. Of the 389 addresses, there were 75 where the researchers were unable to make any contact with someone at the residence, thus the eligibility of these households for the study is unknown. People at another 18 addresses refused participation, so the screener could not be administered. This left a total of 296 addresses where contact was made by the research team and the screening questionnaire was administered. Of these 296 addresses, 257 of them, or 86.8%, were ineligible for the study, mostly because the household did not contain children in the desired age range (3-15). Based on this alone, it is clear that the yield rate even for households potentially eligible was quite low. Indeed, the 38 interviews conducted represents just 9.8% of the total addresses (403), or just 12.9% of the addresses where contact was made and the screening questionnaire was administered (296).

Table 4. Interview Yields from the Five Sites, Random Sampling Only

	Urban #1	Urban #2	Urban #3	Rural #1	Rural #2	Total
Total addresses	100	100	97*	42**	50***	389
Unable to contact	15	18	40	1	1	75
Refusals	7	6	3	1	1	18
Contact made and screener administered	78	76	54	40	48	296
Ineligible	64	69	49	31	44	257
Eligible; interview conducted	14	7	5	9	3	38
Interview yield rate of total addresses	14.0%	7.0%	5.2%	21.4%	6.0%	9.8%
Interview yield rate of those screened	17.9%	9.2%	9.3%	22.5%	6.3%	12.9%
Below 25% of FPL	1	0	0	2	0	3
Extreme poverty rate of total addresses	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.8%	0.0%	0.8%
Extreme poverty rate of those screened	1.3%	0.0%	0.0%	5.0%	0.0%	1.0%

* Less than 100 because 3 doors were not knocked.

** 52 addresses were selected, but 7 addresses were student housing and another 3 addresses that did not physically exist, hence we knocked on 42 doors

*** 51 addresses were selected, but 1 addresses did not physically exist, hence the possibility of knocking on 51 doors

However, there is more to the results than the overall yield rates. The results are somewhat more varied when each neighborhood is examined individually. Urban neighborhood #1, for example, had a contact rate of 78%, an interview yield rate for all addresses of 14%, and an interview yield rate for those addresses where the screener was administered

of 17.9%. Similarly, rural neighborhood #1 had a contact rate of 95%, an interview yield rate for all addresses of 21.4%, and an interview yield rate for those addresses where the screener was administered of 22.5%. Notably, these two neighborhoods are the two African American neighborhoods in the sample. The contact and yield rates for the white and Hispanic neighborhoods were lower, much lower in the case of the urban Hispanic neighborhood. Table 4 also shows that we were able to identify a total of three families in extreme poverty, which is a yield that is next to zero (0.8%) as a percentage of the overall sample. However, while this is low as a percentage of the overall addresses, these three extremely poor families represent 7.9% of the 38 households interviewed.

Basic descriptive statistics about those who were interviewed are in Tables 5 and 6. The interview data does not allow us to make every calculation for every person, hence the different “n’s” for different indicators. As the tables show, there were similarities and differences between the urban and rural sites. The average age of the interviewed respondents from both sites was just above 40. The urban household size was larger by three-quarters of a person (4.84 versus 4.1), and the urban households also averaged about 1.5 more children than the rural households (3.43 versus 1.9). The average monthly household income was comparable between the urban and rural sites, with the urban site being slightly lower; this is also the case with the daily income per person per day for each site.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of those interviewed in the urban sites, all block groups and all survey methods, combined

Indicator	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Head of household age (n=22)	19	56	40.1
Household size (n=24)	3	9	4.84
Number of children under 18 (n=24)	1	8	3.43
Monthly household income (n=24)	\$500.00	\$3,300.00	\$1,648.00
Daily income per person per day (n=24)	\$3.29	\$32.00	\$12.62

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of those interviewed in the rural sites, all block groups and all survey methods, combined

Indicator	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Head of Household Age (n=12)	26	73	42.3
Household Size (n=12)	2	6	4.1
Number of Children under 18 (n=12)	1	4	1.9
Monthly Household Income (n=9)	\$196.00	\$3,750.00	\$1,787.00
Daily Income per Person per Day (n=9)	\$2.68	\$36.98	\$14.29

Although we did not make official counts of the presence of various government assistance programs, in general it was the case that the use of public assistance varied by neighborhood and by site. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was the most common program. Evidence of TANF was most prominent in urban neighborhood #1; other neighborhoods, both urban and rural, had very low or no rates of TANF receipt. (More on TANF below.) Other transfer and in-kind programs in the sample included disability benefits, tax credits, medical assistance, and housing assistance. Anecdotally, the role of housing assistance in the lives of the extreme poor warrants further study since it plays a critical role in buffering some among the extreme poor from the residential instability characteristic of this population. Both of the extremely poor families featured in the vignettes above live in subsidized housing.

Another observation from the interviews is that even with a large number of families receiving medical assistance, physical and mental health was a huge obstacle for families in their pursuit of economic stability. Of the questions on the initial screener, the one that asked about a health problem that prevented work was the question most often answered affirmatively by families in the urban sample who screened into the study. The link between health and extreme poverty—as well as between poverty and disability assistance—should be studied more closely.

CONCLUSIONS

We draw several conclusions from this pilot study. **First, finding the extreme poor, even in areas of concentrated poverty, is challenging.** This could be the case for several reasons. Even though the survey data indicates the population of the extreme poor is quite large in the aggregate, this population is still a small minority of the poor and a much smaller percentage of the overall population. In this sense, the low yield rate from the random sampling is unsurprising. While both sampling approaches allowed us to find many families living in poverty, the method of using randomly selected addresses proved difficult and time-consuming. Many of the addresses were households that were simply ineligible, mostly due to the lack of qualifying children. Ultimately, only about 10% of the households in the random sample screened into the interview sample. We do not recommend this as a method for finding the extremely poor. Additionally, if the extreme poor face residential and relational instability, as the work of Edin and Shaefer (2015) suggests, then an approach that starts with fixed physical addresses is less likely to be successful. Methods that take the residential instability of this population into account are needed.

Second, we recommend a life-history approach when interviewing the extreme poor. Based upon the interviews conducted for this pilot, we encountered a number of individuals who, while not extremely poor at the moment of the interview, had experienced extreme poverty in their lifetimes. This finding underscores the fact that extreme poverty can be episodic for some families and highlights the value of using what has been called “narrative interviewing,” in which interviewers are trained to put a premium on eliciting narratives from the respondent (see DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016). Our interviews began by asking respondents to tell us the story of their life. Interviewers were trained to allow the conversation to unfold naturally and to further draw out respondents with key prompts. Particularly important was getting the history of the respondent’s economic and family life, which can provide evidence of previous bouts of extreme poverty. While not as ideal as a true longitudinal study, these life histories can “stand in” in a small sense and give an idea if a family has ever experienced extreme poverty.

Third, venue-based sampling holds promise for finding these families in the future. Although venue-based sampling was not fully tested in this pilot, our limited experience with this method, combined with the challenges encountered using the random sample, leads us to conclude that a venue-based approach is preferred. However, such sampling should be as systematic as possible, and venues should be varied to try and capture different types of extremely poor families. Venue-based sampling is probably the most cost- and time-effective way of sampling the population of Americans living in extreme poverty. A related team of researchers from Johns Hopkins are currently conducting a systematic sample of venues serving the very poor in the Baltimore area. Based on the results of this study, we believe the approach of systematic, venue-based recruitment is more likely to find families living at or near 25% of the federal poverty line.

Finally, we suspect that the presence of TANF likely affects the prevalence of extreme poverty, and this effect is differential across geography. While TANF does not even lift a family above 50% of the federal poverty line, it does lift them out of extreme poverty. Thus, the presence of TANF, even if much smaller than in past decades, indeed makes a dent in extreme poverty. Figure 1 shows the percent of families receiving TANF in Baltimore by neighborhood. Several neighborhoods in the center of the city, the home to current and former public housing, show the highest TANF concentration. Urban neighborhood #1 falls within one of these high-TANF areas. The relatively high percentage of TANF in these neighborhoods might actually make it more difficult to find extreme poverty.

Figure 1. Percent of Families Receiving TANF in Baltimore by Neighborhood, 2013

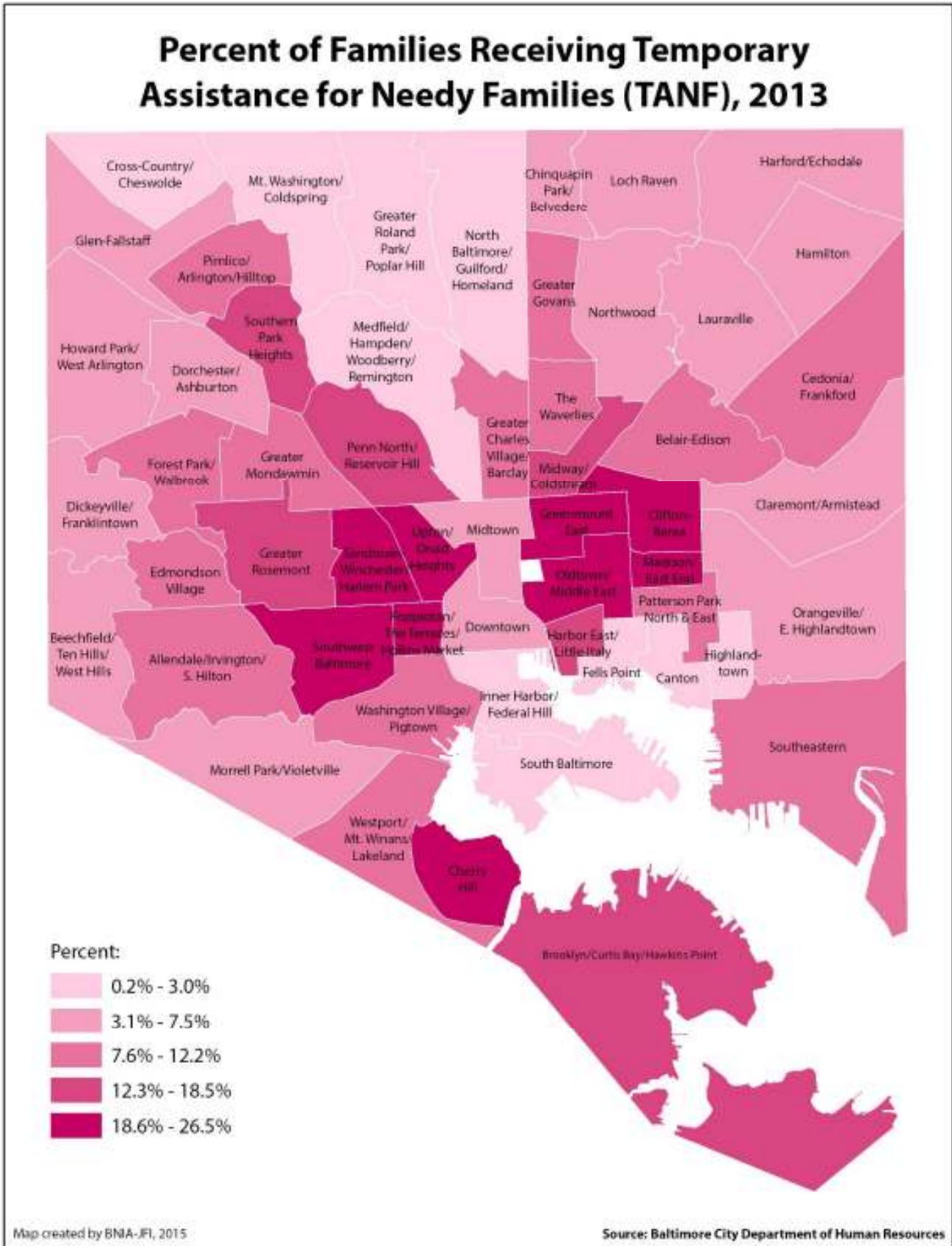


Table 7 elaborates this point using the state of Maryland. This table shows what the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities calls the TANF-to-poverty ratio¹, or the ratio of the number of children living in poverty over the number of children in families receiving TANF. The resulting ratio gives a sense of the “coverage” or saturation of TANF. As Table 7 shows, the TANF-to-poverty ratio varies from county-to-county, from a low of just 7.9 in Worcester County to a high of 47.7 in Baltimore City. In fact, Baltimore is an outlier for the state; the next highest TANF-to-poverty ratio in Maryland is the 29.4 in Cecil County. While these figures are down significantly from historical levels, Baltimore still evidences much more TANF than anywhere else in Maryland. And as we see in Figure 1, the presence of TANF is not uniform throughout the city. These two pieces of evidence together are clues that the presence or absence of TANF, even down to the neighborhood level, might be worth consideration when seeking to find the extreme poor. Notably, the TANF-to-poverty ratio in Somerset County, our other site, is 21.4, and we failed to find any families receiving TANF during our fieldwork.

Table 7. Ratio of the Number of Child TANF Recipients to the Number of Minors in Poverty, 2013

Jurisdiction	Poverty Estimate, Age 0-17*	TANF Paid Child Recipients, Monthly Average**	TANF-to-Poverty Ratio
Maryland	184,220	46,767	25.4
Allegany County	3,107	627	20.2
Anne Arundel County	11,693	2,628	22.5
Baltimore County	22,685	5,552	24.5
Calvert County	1,895	223	11.8
Caroline County	1,848	337	18.2
Carroll County	2,956	310	10.5
Cecil County	3,504	1,029	29.4
Charles County	4,104	749	18.2
Dorchester County	1,942	544	28.0
Frederick County	4,983	830	16.7
Garrett County	1,406	127	9.0
Harford County	5,508	932	16.9
Howard County	5,021	1,087	21.7
Kent County	716	165	23.1
Montgomery County	23,094	2,133	9.2
Prince George's County	27,958	5,014	17.9
Queen Anne's County	1,179	168	14.3
St. Mary's County	3,188	921	28.9
Somerset County	1,632	349	21.4
Talbot County	1,173	131	11.1
Washington County	5,613	1,311	23.3
Wicomico County	5,044	1,415	28.1
Worcester County	2,012	159	7.9
Baltimore City	41,957	20,026	47.7

* Source: U.S. Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) Program, State and County Estimates, 2013

** Source: Calculations using data from Maryland Department of Human Resources (RFrancis)

Next steps for this project are fourfold. A team of researchers is currently in the field using a more rigorous venue-based technique to find the extreme poor in Baltimore. Participants are being screened with a much more extensive survey, and a qualitative team is following up with in-depth interviews. Second, we are seeking permission to draw a sample of the extremely poor using administrative records that would allow better targeting and a real-time response. Third, the interviews conducted as part of this pilot are being transcribed and will be analyzed for insight into the lives of poor

¹ For full explanation of the TANF-to-poverty ratio methodology, see Appendix A in “TANF Continues to Weaken as a Safety Net” by Iffe Floyd, Ladonna Pavetti, and Liz Schott at <http://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/tanf-continues-to-weaken-as-a-safety-net>.

families. And finally, we are further exploring the role of TANF and other safety net programs in ameliorating the presence in extreme poverty.

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