These questions stem from a larger literature which explores the trade-offs that families face when entering homeless shelters. While having a roof over one’s head is likely worth the trade-off, it can mean uprooting children from their schools, leaving social support systems, moving to a neighborhood with high-crime, and moving farther from work, among other challenges. The instability of living in a homeless shelter—especially one far from integral resources—can make it more difficult to return to economic self-sufficiency and stabilized housing. This project aims to explore these issues as they relate to Boston, Massachusetts, and better understand how shelters are meeting the needs of the populations than utilize them.

Based on a review of existing literature, I used seven criteria to determine what constitutes an at-risk area. High concentrations of:

1. Female-headed households with children
2. Low-income households
3. Welfare recipients
4. Latino populations
5. African-American populations
6. Disabled populations
7. Veterans

Identifying At-Risk Areas:

Using census tracts, a map was created for each characteristic (see maps at bottom of poster). For a given characteristic, each tract was ranked from one to four, with one being the lowest concentration and four being the highest concentration of the variable. For each tract I then summed the rankings for all seven variables to yield an overall ranking. The tracts with the highest ranking were the most at-risk of being homeless.

Mapping Shelters:

I then mapped shelter points over the map of at-risk areas. I categorized the shelters into five types based on who the shelter accepts: (1) families, (2) individuals (3) men only (4) women only, and (5) veterans. The map to the right shows shelter locations in relation to the at-risk areas.

Analyzing Resources in Service Area:

In order to understand if the shelters were located near resources, I created a 1/4 miles walkable service area around the shelters that accept families and women with children. I focused on these shelters because families have a very high need for resources like schools and parks so that their children have as much stability as possible. I then mapped school points (categorized by school type—elementary, middle, and high school) and public parks and open spaces that fell within the service areas to visualize their proximity to the shelters.

Conclusions

The project used data from the 2012 American Community Survey (ACS), which can have substantial margins of error; thus, maps may contain statistical inaccuracies. The seven criteria used to determine at-risk areas are not exhaustive, nor are they absolute determinants of homelessness. Additionally, each shelter has a different number of beds—some with very few—and varying criteria for admission, such as sobriety or mental illness, which are not included in this analysis. Additionally, some shelters (not included in this analysis) do not advertise their address, so more research would need to go into locating those exact locations for a more robust dataset.