

Fact Sheet

Questions and Answers on Homelessness Policy and Research

What is a Point-in-Time Count?

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How many people are currently homeless in the United States? How many of them are families, youth, or veterans? The answers to these questions and more can be answered by point-in-time counts. A point-in-time count is an unduplicated count on a single night of the people in a community who are experiencing homelessness that includes both sheltered and unsheltered populations.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires that communities receiving federal funds from the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grants program conduct a point-in-time count at least every other year. The practical impact of this requirement is that each community in the country must conduct a point-in-time count every other year.

During these point-in-time counts, communities are required to identify whether a person is an individual, a member of a family unit, or an unaccompanied youth under the age of 18. In addition, communities must identify if a person is chronically homeless, indicating long-time or repeated homelessness and the presence of a disability. Communities report the numbers from their point-in-time counts on their Continuum of Care (CoC) application.

HUD requires that these biannual counts occur during the last week of January. The first of these counts was conducted in January 2005. Many communities conduct point-in-time counts annually, rather than just meet the minimum requirement of counting biannually.

Point-in-time counts are important because they establish the dimensions of the problem of homelessness and help policymakers and program administrators track progress toward the goal of ending homelessness. Collecting data on homelessness and tracking progress can inform public opinion, increase public awareness, and attract resources that will lead to the eradication of the problem. If homeless youth are not included in local point-in-time counts, their needs could be under-represented as governments, nonprofits, and key stakeholders at the federal, state, and local level plan to respond to the problem.

HUD uses information from the local point-in-time counts, among other data sources, in the congressionally-mandated Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR). This report is meant to inform Congress about the number of people experiencing homelessness in the U.S. and the effectiveness of HUD's programs and policies in decreasing those numbers.

On the local level, point-in-time counts help communities plan services and programs to appropriately address local needs, measure progress in decreasing homelessness, and identify strengths and gaps in a community's current homelessness assistance system.

On Youth

One gap that exists in these point-in-time counts is the coverage of unaccompanied youth (or those living separately from any family members) under the age of 24. Despite the fact that point-in-time counts are required to collect the number of unaccompanied youth under the age of 18, those numbers do not appear accurate, with the majority of CoCs reporting that there are zero unaccompanied youth in their communities. Youth may be afraid or unwilling to enter individual shelters and communities typically have scarce resources, beds, and units dedicated to youth. This means that, in most communities, the required count of sheltered youth is more likely a count of beds available to youth as opposed to the number of youth who need shelter.

Even further complications arise in trying to identify the number of youth who are unsheltered. Youth are often not engaged with traditional homelessness assistance programs and congregate in different areas than older individuals experiencing homelessness. This makes unsheltered youth harder to find and therefore to count.

Without adequate coverage of homeless youth in point-in-time counts, there is a danger that they will continue to be underserved. For more information on how to ensure that youth are counted in your community's point-in-time count, visit <http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/3475>.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness' Fact Sheets answer common and frequently asked questions about homelessness policy and research. This series draws on the best expertise, data, and research available. For more information about homelessness, please visit www.endhomelessness.org