



December 12, 2014

SNAPS In Focus: A Discussion About the Point-In-Time Count

As you all have probably seen, on October 30, 2014, HUD released the data reported to us by CoCs from the [2014 Point-in-Time count](#) (2014 PIT). In today's In Focus I want to spend some time talking about that report - how we use it, the limitations of the data, how we can use all our data in meaningful ways, and how we can work together.

Each year the PIT Count Report releases data that communities collect and report to us, without extrapolation by HUD. It is not perfect – especially on newer requirements like the collection of data on unaccompanied youth – but it is the most ambitious and comprehensive count we have of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness, and it provides a lot of information we didn't have 10 years ago.

The good news is that, nationally, we are continuing to see decreases in key areas like homelessness among veterans and chronic homelessness. This makes sense – as we target our federal resources and as communities become more strategic we hope to see numbers reported at a point in time decrease across all populations.

But that does not mean that every community is seeing decreases. In 2014, about 55% of CoCs reported an overall decrease in homelessness while the other 45% reported an overall increase. Some communities saw mixed results – up in some categories and down in others. The [data for each community](#) is posted with the report so that all stakeholders can see the local context.

The PIT report is a great national point of reference because it is easy to understand and has been in place for a long time. Both the PIT and the Housing Inventory Count help us to understand at the local and national levels what our systems look like and help us to benchmark progress – but the PIT is not the only measure that either we at HUD nor local communities use to fully understand the complex dynamic of homelessness and how the systems are functioning. We rely on numerous data sources, including program data from across the federal government, and the American Housing Survey, which captures information about doubled up households and worst-case housing needs. Communities should use their Housing Inventory Counts, HMIS data and other relevant data sets to measure progress and performance.

Now that it is clear what it is, let's talk about what the 2014 PIT Report is not. The PIT count does not identify who is eligible for HUD's homeless assistance programs. The PIT only attempts to count persons that are living in unsheltered and certain sheltered situations; it would not be possible for CoCs to count persons that meet all categories of homelessness as defined by HUD even though they may be eligible for certain homeless assistance programs. The PIT report is also not a statement that everything is going according to plan or that we have won the fight against homelessness. It also does not replace the data published by the Department of Education or other agencies - each set of data the federal agencies publish provides unique pieces of the homelessness puzzle.

In response to the release of the data, we saw some groups and individuals not only question the PIT data itself but also imply that the only people eligible for HUD's homeless assistance are those that were included in the PIT count. Healthy debate on the data is good and pushes communities and HUD to improve methods for data collection and reporting – and we want to keep getting better. One way to do this is to involve homeless youth providers during the planning and implementation of your 2015 PIT count.



However, I would argue that as a community we should collectively regroup and think about how we can do better work together in three main ways:

- **Ensure that local programs know that the PIT results and eligibility for HUD's programs are not the same.** We count in the PIT those persons who are living on the streets and in shelter or transitional housing, but do not attempt to enumerate those who might meet the definition of homelessness in other categories. By erroneously tying the PIT results to program eligibility, we fear that families, youth, and adults will not be referred to emergency programs that could provide life-saving shelter and support. For some relevant examples, please refer to the recent guidance posted about [*HUD's Homeless Definition as it Relates to Children and Youth*](#).
- **All of us in the homeless services world have the same goal – to end homelessness.** We don't have to agree exactly how to get there, and informed debate is important to the development of national and local policies. But we need to work together to identify promising practices and make the case for the resources we need across all agencies and programs.
- **Use the PIT Count Report not to fan the flames about the homeless definition - but to help us get to a more mature discussion about affordable housing and how that would help us end homelessness, especially for families.** Just as we look at many different data sources to assess needs, we include many different programs in our strategies to address housing needs. Expanding HUD's homelessness definition with no new money would adversely impact the systems we fund and important progress being made. However, many of the families in the proposed expanded definition simply need affordable housing. We should be working to ensure that they can access the affordable housing they need without being forced to go through the homelessness system.

So, here is what I ask of you in your programs at the local level.

Please be sure that your programs understand eligibility and do not make decisions based on misinformation that may be out there. We are working to get more guidance out on this to help clarify these issues.

We understand the limitations of PIT data, and we use it in conjunction with other data sets to inform our work. We ask you to do the same. Understand what PIT data can and cannot tell you about homelessness in your community, and use other data sources to complement PIT data.

Use your data to engage in meaningful debate about the issues at the local and national levels. Encourage strategic thinking and innovation. Work with your local Public Housing Authorities, HOME grantees and other housing developers to discuss affordable housing options.

Work together and with us at HUD to get to the goal I know we are ALL aiming towards, which is ending homelessness by serving those who present for assistance in the best way we can.

As always, thank you for your commitment and hard work.

Ann Marie Oliva
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Special Needs
Acting Director, Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs