

Measure 3: Number of Homeless Persons

Ending homelessness in the U.S. by 2020 will require us to make significant improvements in the way our homelessness systems function. The department has developed a set of seven system-level measures to help communities understand their systems' performance. This video features Measure 3 of the seven, and explains why this measure is important, how it is calculated and how you might consider using this measure locally.

How many people are homeless in the U.S.? How many families and children are homeless? What about individuals? Are these numbers going up, staying the same, or going down? Counts tell us at the most basic level how big the problem of homelessness is, and whether our efforts are making a difference over time. If we're successful at re-housing those who are homeless and preventing homelessness in the future, the counts will go down. Counts also allow us to estimate the resources needed to help people who are homeless.

In this measure, we count homelessness in two ways. The first is usually referred to as a point-in-time count. That tells us how many people are homeless on a single day. The second is an annual count. That tells us how many people are homeless over the course of a year. We rely on HMIS and point-in-time count data for this measure, and the goal is to see reductions total number of people who are homeless from one year to the next. Let me show you the difference between these two counts, and then afterwards, I'll talk about how each of these counts can help us end homelessness.

We'll start with the point-in-time count. This means we're focused on just one day of the year. HUD asks communities to count everyone who's homeless in their area on a single night in late January. The idea is that on a cold winter night, most people will choose to stay inside, whether in a shelter or residential project to get out of the cold, so it's a little easier to find people. Let's start by counting everyone who's "sheltered", meaning they're staying in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or safe havens on the night of the count. For instance, Bob happens to be sleeping in an emergency shelter on the night of the Point In Time

Count, so he gets counted as “sheltered”. Then let’s count all of the people who are “unsheltered,” meaning they’re staying in cars, in encampments, in building doorways, under blankets on heating grates, or other places that aren’t intended for shelter. The total of the sheltered and unsheltered numbers on the selected night is a community’s point in time count. While the sheltered count can often be pulled from a community’s HMIS, staff and volunteers have to canvass the streets to find and count people who are unsheltered on the night of the count. It takes hard work and we know that point-in-time counts don’t account for absolutely everyone who’s homeless on the designated night, but we’ve learned a lot about how to conduct more accurate counts over the years. HUD has posted links to guidance that may be helpful alongside this video.

Now, let’s talk about an annual count. The annual count tallies all the people who use emergency shelters, transitional housing, or safe havens at any point in the year. This means that if Barbara is in housing on the night of the Point In Time Count, but uses an emergency shelter later in the year, she would not be captured in the Point In Time Count but would be counted in the annual count. So it gives a more complete picture of bed use throughout the year. Let’s look at an example. Say 15 people are sleeping in three different homeless projects on January 26th. Then 2 people leave the emergency shelter project on January 27th and 2 new people come in to stay in those beds. The total number of people in that project is still 5, but the overall annual count went up by 2. So the two-day count for all three projects would be 17 people. We’d check again to see if there are new people on January 28th, and so on, and those people add to the rolling total that increases throughout the year with every new stay. So if Bob comes and stays at the transitional housing project for one month, he counts as one. If Barbara also comes to stay at the transitional housing project, even for a day, now the count is 2, because it’s about counting the number of individual people who come into the system, even if that person uses two or three different shelters during the year.

While this sounds quite tedious, HMIS has made the process of counting the number of people who are served in homeless projects much easier. HMIS data

also allow us to understand the length and patterns of people's homelessness, which is not possible from point-in-time data.

Annual counts have their limitations. First, if a project doesn't report data in HMIS, like a DV project, the people served there won't be represented in the count unless the community uses other data or estimates the number of people served in the project. Second, since annual counts reflect those who use shelters and homeless projects, they won't always represent people who are homeless but unsheltered during that year. Fortunately, we know that many people who stay in their cars or on the streets will use a shelter at some point during the year, so many will likely be represented in the annual count, but again, a community needs to understand that the annual count may be missing people.

Now that you understand what these counts mean, let's talk about how you can use the results locally and why it's helpful to collect both point-in-time and annual counts.

Together, the counts help you understand how many people are experiencing homelessness in your community. The point-in-time count and the additional data that are captured as part of the count process can be compared with a count of shelter beds and other homeless resources to tell you whether the resources you have assembled are sufficient. Point-in-time counts of the unsheltered – particularly if you mine the data to understand how many have been homeless for a long time – are helpful for estimating the amount of permanent supportive housing your community needs.

The annual count rounds out your understanding of how people who experience homelessness move through your system. When you understand how many people are entering your system, you can budget for prevention resources to help stop people from experiencing homelessness in the first place. When you understand how many people are leaving your system, you can explore the data further to try to understand how many people seem to get "stuck" your system, and their family size, which will help you budget for rapid rehousing resources. Deep dives into both types of counts help your community understand the magnitude of homelessness among groups that might benefit from – or be eligible

for – a population-specific intervention, such as transition-age youth. HUD knows that only relying on a Point in Time count tends to mask the volume of people coming in and out throughout the year. But when paired together, the point-in-time and annual counts give us a strong understanding of homelessness and can help us plan strategies to end it.

So that was Measure 3, Number of Homeless People. Next is Measure 4, Employment and Income Growth for Homeless People.