

Measure 5: Number of Persons who Become Homeless for the First Time

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 5 of the seven, and explains why this measure is important, how it is calculated and how you might consider using this measure locally.

To end homelessness we have to ensure that all currently homeless people are stably housed and do not return to homelessness... but we also have to reduce the number of people who become homeless in the first place through successful prevention. The goal of this measure is to reduce every year the number of people who become homeless for the first time. Let's look at what this means for Laura who has never been homeless. She is about to be evicted from her home and doesn't know what to do, she thinks her only choice is to go to emergency shelter. Before she sleeps at the emergency shelter, a worker from the local Homelessness Prevention services meets with her. They work together to find someplace safe for her to stay and her sister agrees that Laura can stay for two weeks. With the help of the Homelessness Prevention services Laura finds housing and moves in. She receives supportive services and limited financial assistance until she is stabilized and has a plan for what she would do if she has another housing crisis. At that point, the Homelessness Prevention project "exits" her. She has an HMIS entry and exit for the Homelessness Prevention project but no stay in shelter, so she was prevented from becoming homeless for the first time.

To start calculating a system's performance on this measure we need to define how to count who becomes homeless for the first time. Because you can't know everyone's life histories, we have defined "first time homeless" to mean a person who had not been served by the community's homeless system in the two years prior to an entry into that homeless system.

Let me show you what I mean using Bob as an example. Bob stayed in an emergency shelter for a week in February in the current reporting period. If we look back in HMIS two years from the day Bob entered the shelter, we find that he had a stay in a shelter 18 months prior to his stay in February. So he is not homeless for the first time, as we have defined it for this measure.

So that's the basic concept. Now let's look at how to measure first time homelessness at the system level.

For the first measure, 5.1 in the guide, we look at all people who entered emergency shelter, safe haven or transitional housing during the current reporting period. In this example 20 people entered these three project types during the reporting period – 6 in emergency shelter, 4 in safe haven and 10 in transitional housing. We then look back from the date each person was first served to see if any of them were served in an emergency shelter, safe haven, transitional housing or permanent housing project types in the two years prior to their individual entry dates. Permanent housing is included in the homeless projects we are checking against because these projects require that people are literally homeless prior to entry. In this way we can make sure we're including previous homeless experiences for those people who may have entered permanent supportive housing without first being served by an HMIS-participating shelter or other homeless service project. Of the 20 people who entered into homeless projects during the reporting period, HMIS data shows that 8 of those people were served in the homeless system at some point during the previous two years. That means that 12 people were homeless for the first time, as we define it for this measure.

Now for the second measure, 5.2 in the guide we will take this one step further, to also consider people who entered permanent housing projects. Let's add in a permanent housing project type to our last picture. We can see that if we count the people who entered into all of these projects now there are 25 people who entered into this homeless system during the reporting period. We repeat the

exact same analysis to see if any of these people were served in the system at any point during the two years before they entered the homeless system this time. We find that of the additional 5 people in the permanent housing project, 4 had been served in the homeless system in the prior two years. So, that brings the total to 13 people in the reporting period who are considered first time homeless. Notice that this measure differs from the others, in that it looks at actual numbers and not percentages. This reflects HUD's belief that part of ending homelessness is shutting the front door through effective prevention, and we measure that through total numbers of newly homeless people.

There are a number of things you can learn from this and other measures about people experiencing homelessness in your system. You can look at this measure along with the results from Measure 3 – Number of Homeless Persons – and Measure 2 – Extent to Which Persons who Exit Homelessness to Permanent Housing Destinations Return to Homelessness – to get a sense of how people are moving into and out of the system over time. Comparing these measures can be useful for spotting trends but it is important to remember that not all of the performance measures start with the same universe of people.

As your system calculates these System Performance Measures over several years you can look for changes that could indicate changes in community conditions – like an increase in people who are homeless for the first time which might require changes in the CoC's homeless prevention projects – or changes in performance – like an increase in returns after a permanent housing exit which might require project evaluation to see what has caused the returns. Though not required by HUD, this is valuable information that can help you strategically commit your system's resources and focus on performance as the needs of the people served by your system change.