

Because Continuums of Care range in size, geographic area, resources, and composition of providers, methodologies for conducting the PIT count vary. However, the PIT Count Methodology Guide identifies the main methodologies that should be used. A high-level overview is given here, but you should review the PIT Count Methodology Guide when determining which options are best for your CoC.

There are two options for how CoCs can determine the demographic and additional population characteristics of people experiencing homelessness: they can use a census count or a sampling approach. CoCs should be intentional when planning the PIT count and selecting the methodology or methodologies used. At the most basic level, CoCs must determine whether a census approach, sampling approach, or a combination of these two approaches is most suitable for the composition of the CoC and its resources.

A census count is an enumeration, or a literal person-by-person count, of every person experiencing homelessness within the CoC geography and their characteristics. A sampling methodology is a partial enumeration of the homeless population.

In a sampling methodology, a smaller group of people is selected in order to obtain some or all needed information about that group, such as substance use disorder. CoCs using a sampling methodology then extrapolate the information gathered and apply it to estimate what the total homeless population or subsets of the population look like.

If a CoC decides to use a sampling methodology, they will need to determine whether to use a random sampling or a non-random sampling approach.

Random probability samples give every person an equal chance of being selected to be interviewed or counted in the PIT count. For example, the CoC could select every third person who enters a shelter. Because random sampling gives every person an equal opportunity to be counted, information gathered can then be reliably adjusted to account for the entire population.

A non-random sample is a sample that is selected based either on convenience or purposively with some other goal in mind. An example of a convenience sample would be, if a small percentage of the population surveyed refused to answer the race or ethnicity questions, the information gathered for the population who answered the question could be used to estimate the data for the group who refused to respond.

In order for the data from a non-random sample to be accurately applied to the broader population, the sample size should be very large (80% or more for a given household type and project type) or

within a subpopulation believed to have similar characteristics. If the sample size is not above 80% for each household type and project type (not just for the overall homeless population), the count is likely to be skewed. For example, if information is gathered for 95% of people in domestic violence shelters but for only 60% of homeless youth, data for homeless youth will be skewed based on the limited sample size. Therefore, data quality must be analyzed at both the project type and household-type level. This ensures that the CoC has the best data possible to conduct its extrapolation.

It is most likely that every CoC will use some combination of sampling and census methodologies. For example, a CoC might choose to count every person to get a total count. In addition, the CoC may conduct interviews with a sample of the homeless population to gather information about their other characteristics, such as veteran status. Keep in mind that CoCs should aim for a sample size of 80% of each household type and project type in order to use non-random sampling methodologies to extrapolate data.