



# CALIFORNIA HOMELESS COORDINATING AND FINANCING COUNCIL

Business, Consumer Services and Housing Agency  
Gavin Newsom, Governor | Alexis Podesta, Chair

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## The Importance of the Homeless Point-in-Time Count

### **What is the PIT count?**

The Point-in-Time (PIT) count is a “snapshot” count of people experiencing homelessness, generally on a single night in January. It is conducted by local Continuums of Care (CoCs)<sup>1</sup> in communities throughout the country. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires all CoCs to conduct PIT counts as a condition of receiving funding. CoCs are required to conduct a PIT count of homeless individuals who are “sheltered” every year, and a PIT count of individuals who are “unsheltered” at least once every two years,<sup>2</sup> though CoCs may choose to conduct an unsheltered count annually. The information gathered during the PIT counts is the main source of data used by the federal government to track the number, demographics and needs of people experiencing homelessness throughout the country over time. These numbers are also used to determine federal funding allocations to address homelessness. States and many local jurisdictions also rely on PIT data to inform strategic planning efforts, funding allocations and impact evaluations of current homeless programs and funding.

People experiencing unsheltered homelessness are individuals and families staying in cars, parks, abandoned buildings, transit stations, or any other place not meant for human habitation.<sup>3</sup> The unsheltered count does not include those at risk of homelessness or in temporary accommodations (e.g. temporarily “doubled up” in someone else’s home or “couch surfing,” etc.), which is one of the reasons the numbers from the PIT count are considered to be lower than the actual number of individuals who are homeless or precariously housed.

The sheltered PIT count requires CoCs to report the number of people who were homeless but staying in a sheltered location, such as an emergency shelter, transitional housing or safe haven.<sup>4</sup> The sheltered PIT count is typically conducted using information collected through a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).<sup>5</sup> An HMIS is an information technology system required by HUD and used on an ongoing basis by CoCs to collect and report data about people in the community who are known to be experiencing or to

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***A Point-in-Time  
count of people  
experiencing  
unsheltered  
homelessness is  
required in 2019.***

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<sup>1</sup> A Continuum of Care (CoC) is a “regional or local planning body that coordinates housing and services funding for homeless families and individuals.” (Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness, “What is a Continuum of Care?” last modified January 14, 2010, accessed January 9, 2019, <https://endhomelessness.org/resource/what-is-a-continuum-of-care/>)

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, “PIT and HIC Guides, Tools and Webinars,” *HUD Exchange*, last modified January 2019, accessed on January 2, 2019, <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/hdx/guides/pit-hic/#general-pit-guides-and-tools>.

<sup>3</sup> United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Section 1: PIT Count Standards & Methodologies,” *Point-in-Time Count Standards and Methodologies Training Series, HUD Exchange*, last modified June 2018, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.hudexchange.info/trainings/pit-count-standards-and-methodologies/section-1-standards-and-methodologies.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

be at risk of homelessness.<sup>6</sup> While HMIS is used to track unsheltered individuals who are homeless and have been in contact with homeless services, it does not track people who have not accessed services. An unsheltered PIT count is needed to survey who else in the community is experiencing unsheltered homelessness but is not already accounted for in the system.

The PIT count typically requires a much larger community effort. There are two approaches to conducting an unsheltered count: a “night-of” count and a “service-based” count.<sup>7</sup>

A night-of count is often referred to as a “street count” and involves either a complete census of the entire CoC, a count in known locations where homeless individuals reside or a random sampling of areas within

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***Volunteers are an essential part of a successful unsheltered PIT count.***

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a CoC.<sup>8</sup> In all of these cases, groups of people affiliated with the CoC walk through the community and count the people they encounter who appear to be unsheltered. CoCs do not usually have enough capacity within the organization to conduct a

full street count, and they typically rely on the participation of volunteers from the community to survey areas within the CoC on the night of the count.

If a CoC chooses to have a service-based count, individuals receiving services throughout the community are interviewed after the chosen PIT count date to determine where they resided on the night of the count. The survey can be administered up to seven days after the actual count date, but the date of the count is always the one asked about on the survey.<sup>9</sup>

## ***Challenges to conducting a PIT count:***

CoCs often encounter many challenges in conducting a successful PIT count, some of which include:

**Limit to CoC capacity:** CoC planning efforts for an unsheltered count are substantial, and some CoCs struggle to dedicate enough resources to conduct a PIT count along with the other required responsibilities of a CoC.

**Dependence on volunteers:** Successful unsheltered counts are often highly dependent on volunteer participation from the community, which requires CoCs to actively recruit and train participants.

**Desire to stay hidden:** It is often difficult to locate and count individuals who may not wish to be found. Some may be concerned with a perceived stigma regarding their housing status, and others may try to remain hidden due to safety concerns.

**Need for willing participation:** Collecting accurate information through surveys with people experiencing homelessness requires their willing participation. Some may be unwilling to divulge personal information about their housing status, age, race, health status, etc. with someone they do not know.

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<sup>6</sup> United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Homeless Management Information System,” *HUD Exchange*, last modified January 2019, accessed January 9, 2019, <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/hmis/>.

<sup>7</sup> United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Section 1: PIT Count Standards & Methodologies,” *Point-in-Time Count Standards and Methodologies Training Series*, *HUD Exchange*, last modified June 2018, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.hudexchange.info/trainings/pit-count-standards-and-methodologies/section-1-standards-and-methodologies.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

## *Limitations of the PIT count:*

The PIT counts are the main sources of data used to understand who is experiencing homelessness across the country. However, data collected from the unsheltered PIT counts have several limitations which result in an undercount of the actual number of people experiencing homelessness:

**Literal definition of homelessness:** People experiencing homelessness but who are staying in a temporary situation in someone else's home are not considered homeless for the purposes of the PIT count.

**Snapshot:** The PIT count features “snapshot” data for one night, but there are many people who cycle in and out of episodes of homelessness throughout the year that might not be counted on that specific night.

**Not everyone is found:** A complete census count is not feasible for many CoCs to conduct, so not all CoC areas are surveyed. Other reasons like the desire to remain hidden, insufficient numbers of volunteers, etc. also lead to fewer people being counted.

**Different methodologies:** CoCs use different methodologies for conducting their unsheltered PIT counts and standards change across time. Limitations apply to data accuracy when aggregating and comparing data collected using different methodologies.

Source: National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, “Don’t Count On It: How the HUD Point-in-Time Count Underestimates the Homelessness Crisis in America” (2017)

The survey must also ask whether the interviewee has already participated in an interview to try and make sure the same person is not accidentally counted twice.<sup>10</sup> CoCs often rely on the participation of volunteers for a service-based count as well.

## ***When is the PIT count?***

All of the PIT counts throughout the country generally take place on a single night in each community during the last ten days in January. The local CoC is responsible for deciding the date for the PIT count in their community. The PIT count is always done at the end of January so that estimates of the number of people experiencing homelessness are as consistent as possible from year to year. In addition, this time period was picked to try to identify the number of people who were unable to access an emergency shelter or other crisis response intervention during the winter, or who were only able to access temporary housing for the first part of the month with public assistance or other monthly benefits.<sup>11</sup> Exceptions to conducting a PIT count during this time period are possible, but very rare. One notable example in California is the CoC for Butte County, which was granted an extension for the 2019 PIT count due to the need for recovery from the Camp Fire that occurred in late 2018.<sup>12</sup>

The actual PIT count is typically conducted only on a single night in each community to try and ensure an “unduplicated” count of individuals experiencing homelessness, though some CoCs have counts in different areas on

<sup>10</sup> United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. “Promising Practices for Counting Youth Experiencing Homelessness in the Point-in-Time Counts.” *HUD Exchange*, last modified November 2016, accessed January 7, 2019, <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Promising-Practices-for-Counting-Youth-Experiencing-Homelessness-in-the-PIT-Counts.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Section 1: PIT Count Standards & Methodologies,” Point-in-Time Count Standards and Methodologies Training Series, *HUD Exchange*, last modified June 2018, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.hudexchange.info/trainings/pit-count-standards-and-methodologies/section-1-standards-and-methodologies.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Information provided by Butte County Continuum of Care staff via email on January 2, 2019.

separate nights to maximize volunteer efforts. A CoC may also continue surveying individuals in the case of a “service-based” count, but the survey asks about where that individual resided on the night of the actual PIT count date.

### **Who participates in the PIT count?**

As mentioned above, the CoC is responsible for planning and overseeing both the sheltered and unsheltered PIT counts. CoCs are expected to collaborate and coordinate with local homeless service providers and other partner organizations in the community in preparation for the count.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the unsheltered PIT counts typically rely on the help of numerous volunteers from the community to be successful. This is especially the case for PIT counts in CoCs that span large geographic areas and/or have large populations of people experiencing homelessness. Without enough volunteer support, it is even more difficult to get an accurate count of the number of people experiencing homelessness on the night of the count.

### **Why is the PIT count important?**

PIT counts are extremely important for several reasons. As noted above, they serve as the main source of data used to understand who is experiencing homelessness, how long they have been homeless and what their needs are. The information from PIT counts throughout the country is collected from each CoC and published in the federal Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR).<sup>14</sup> The AHAR contains information about not only the number of people experiencing homelessness in the country, but also other important characteristics of the homeless population, including the prevalence of homelessness among veterans, families, unaccompanied youth and broken down by different racial and ethnic groups. The PIT count data helps policymakers decide how best to allocate funds

## *What we learned from the last PIT count:*

**129,972  
people**

Almost 130,000 people experiencing homelessness were counted in California on a single night in January 2018. **20,964** of those were people in families with children, and **12,396** were unaccompanied homeless youth.

**69%  
without  
shelter**

Over two-thirds of those experiencing homelessness on that night were unsheltered.

**-1.2%  
since 2017**

**+5.3%  
since 2010**

Overall, the number of people experiencing homelessness in California decreased slightly from 2017; however the number of people experiencing homelessness has still risen by over five percent since 2010.

Source: United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. “The 2018 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. Part 1: Point-in-Time Estimates of Homelessness.” (2018)

<sup>13</sup> United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Section 1: PIT Count Standards & Methodologies,” Point-in-Time Count Standards and Methodologies Training Series, *HUD Exchange*, last modified June 2018, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.hudexchange.info/trainings/pit-count-standards-and-methodologies/section-1-standards-and-methodologies.html>.

<sup>14</sup> United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, “The 2018 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. Part 1: Point-in-Time Estimates of Homelessness,” *HUD Exchange*, last modified December 2018, accessed January 9, 2019, <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2018-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>.

## Subgroup Spotlight: Homeless Youth

Some groups are particularly challenging to count accurately during the PIT count, such as youth who are experiencing homelessness. Youth and young adults (up to age 25) often experience homelessness differently from adults who are homeless, and youth may be more hidden because of safety concerns. This can make these individuals more difficult to locate during a typical PIT count.

Some best practices suggested for more complete counts of homeless youth include:

1. Reaching out to organizations that serve youth and young adults (such as local education liaisons, child welfare advocates, etc.)
2. Providing survey incentives like bus passes, store vouchers, etc.
3. Creating a youth-specific supplemental survey
4. Using social media to advertise PIT count events
5. Conducting “magnet events” that draw youth for the PIT count, such as a free pizza dinner
6. Engaging youth throughout the PIT planning process

Source: United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Promising Practices for Counting Youth Experiencing Homelessness in the Point-in-Time Counts.” (2016)

for state and federal programs, so an accurate count can lead to more funding for homeless programs in a community. In particular, this data is used by HUD in their funding allocations for several homeless programs.

Without enough community support during the PIT Count, less information may be collected about who is experiencing homelessness and what their needs are. This has both strategic and financial consequences in limiting the ability of communities to effectively deploy resources to address homelessness.

### **What makes a PIT count successful?**

**A successful PIT count locates as many people experiencing homelessness as possible.** Communities that are not able to locate a large proportion of their homeless population on the night of the count will not have reliable estimates of those experiencing homelessness or information about their characteristics and needs. In addition, these communities risk receiving less financial support from state and/or federal programs that could be used to more adequately provide services to homeless individuals and families. Another potential problem is that if a particular subpopulation of people experiencing homeless (e.g. homeless youth, families, etc.) is undercounted on the night of the count, a CoC will not have a complete picture of who in their communities is experiencing homelessness and therefore may not target resources to address their needs.

**A successful PIT count collects as much relevant data as possible.** The unsheltered PIT count is a valuable opportunity to learn more about who is experiencing homelessness in a community. Although CoCs are only tasked with collecting and reporting specific information mandated by HUD, many CoCs choose to ask additional questions on surveys administered during the count to obtain as much information as possible. For example, while the CoC is responsible for reporting the number of people who are “literally

homeless”<sup>15</sup> to HUD, some CoCs use the PIT count to learn more about others in their community who fall under a less restrictive definition of homelessness.<sup>16</sup> As another example, several CoCs in California are considering adding supplemental questions to determine who has been made homeless as a result of the recent fires or other natural disasters.

**A successful PIT count should generate high-quality data.** The results from the PIT count can only be as good as the quality of the underlying data. Confusing survey questions, unprepared volunteers and data entry mistakes after the count can all negatively affect the data quality of the numbers and other insights from the PIT count. Ending the count with high-quality data should be a fundamental goal of a successful PIT count.

**How to get involved:**

Many CoCs are still signing up volunteers to assist in conducting the unsheltered PIT count in their area, and volunteer participation directly contributes towards making PIT counts a success. Note that volunteers are usually required to sign up ahead of time, and they are often required to attend a training and/or orientation before the actual count.

The Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council has compiled a list of contacts for the PIT counts within each CoC, which can be viewed on its website: [www.bcsh.ca.gov/hcfc](http://www.bcsh.ca.gov/hcfc). Contact the local CoC for more details about how to get involved in these efforts.

**A successful PIT count should:**

- 1. Locate as many people experiencing unsheltered homelessness as possible.**
- 2. Collect enough information to better understand who is experiencing homelessness.**
- 3. Ensure that the information collected is accurately reported.**



<sup>15</sup>An individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, meaning: (i) Has a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not meant for human habitation; (ii) Is living in a publicly or privately operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangements (including congregate shelters, transitional housing, and hotels and motels paid for by charitable organizations or by federal, state and local government programs); or (iii) Is exiting an institution where (s)he has resided for 90 days or less and who resided in an emergency shelter or place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering that institution. (Source: United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, *HUD Exchange*, last modified January 2012, accessed January 7, 2019, [https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/HomelessDefinition\\_RecordkeepingRequirementsandCriteria.pdf](https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/HomelessDefinition_RecordkeepingRequirementsandCriteria.pdf).)

<sup>16</sup> United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Section 1: PIT Count Standards & Methodologies,” Point-in-Time Count Standards and Methodologies Training Series, *HUD Exchange*, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.hudexchange.info/trainings/pit-count-standards-and-methodologies/section-1-standards-and-methodologies.html>.

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## Additional Resources:

"What is a Point-in-Time Count?" – National Alliance to End Homelessness: <https://endhomelessness.org/resource/what-is-a-point-in-time-count/>.

"We Count California!: Lessons Learned from Efforts to Improve Youth Inclusion in California's 2015 Point-in-Time Counts" – California Homeless Youth Project: <http://cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov/docs/pdf/WeCountCalifFinal.pdf>.

"SNAPS In Focus: A Discussion About the Point-in-Time Count" – United States Department of Housing and Urban Development: <https://www.hudexchange.info/news/snaps-in-focus-a-discussion-about-the-point-in-time-count/>