2. Counting Unsheltered Homeless People: The Basics

This chapter provides basic information on counting unsheltered homeless people. The chapter begins with a discussion about the benefits of conducting counts and what has been learned to date from counting unsheltered persons. This is followed by a discussion of recent changes in HUD's requirements for conducting "street" and other counts. The chapter ends by introducing the basic approaches to collecting data on unsheltered homeless people.

2.1   Why Count Unsheltered Homeless People?

Information about unsheltered homeless people is useful for: (1) service planning; (2) demonstrating a need for resources in the Continuum of Care application; (3) raising public awareness about the issue of homelessness; (4) accurately measuring and identifying the needs of populations that are the hardest to serve (chronically homeless); and (5) measuring performance in eliminating homelessness, particularly chronic homelessness.

Planning and Program Development

Collecting good data on the number, characteristics, and service needs of unsheltered homeless people is a critical component of local homeless planning and program development. Data collected on unsheltered homeless people can help individual service providers and CoCs:

- Justify requests for additional resources;
- Plan future services geared to unsheltered homeless people;
- Allocate resources across jurisdictions, service providers, or programs for different subgroups of homeless people;
- Understand changes in trends among homeless populations; and
- Comply with reporting requirements from HUD, other funders, and local stakeholders.

> Communities routinely collect information on unsheltered homeless people in order to learn:
>
> - How many homeless people do not use shelters;
> - Where in the community they live;
> - How many are chronically homeless;
> - What they need and will accept to end their homelessness; and
> - How to intervene with newly homeless people to prevent chronic homelessness.

The Continuum of Care Application for McKinney-Vento Funds

New emphasis by HUD on the regular enumeration of chronic homelessness adds to the importance of estimating the true number of unsheltered homeless people and understanding their patterns of homelessness (see Section 2.2 for HUD's definition of chronic

homelessness). Many chronically homeless people do not use shelters. In the past, many local jurisdictions only counted people in emergency shelter, transitional housing, or permanent supportive housing programs, and made no attempt to count "street people" or those that do not use shelters. The Continuum of Care application now requires CoCs to identify the extent of chronic homelessness within their boundaries. CoCs must report the number of chronically homeless people among people in shelters *and* among the unsheltered homeless population, based on local data collected through "on the ground" counts.

HUD's Definition of Homelessness

Continuums should keep HUD's definition of homelessness in mind as they plan their public places count. According to HUD, a person is considered homeless **only** when he/she resides in one of the places described below at the time of the count.

An *unsheltered* homeless person resides in:

- In a place not meant for human habitation, such as cars, parks, sidewalks, abandoned buildings (on the street).

A *sheltered* homeless person resides in:

- In an emergency shelter.

- In transitional housing or supportive housing for homeless persons who originally came from the streets or emergency shelters.

Raising Public Awareness and Community Involvement

Many CoCs have found that counting homeless people on a regular basis is valuable for raising public awareness. The primary benefit of a "street" count, particularly in suburban and rural areas where homeless people may not be visible, is making the public aware that unsheltered homeless people live in their community. "Street" counts typically receive a lot of attention from the press, which CoCs can use to their advantage to garner public support for homeless programs and services. The counts also require a large number of volunteers who may have had little exposure to issues of homelessness. Volunteers may include students and young people who discover an interest in community service, community residents who become more understanding of homeless people in their neighborhoods, or key local stakeholders who may be in a position to mobilize funds for homeless programs. Some communities have even used the counts to build relationships between people who approach homelessness

> "We have been doing our street count for 20 years now, and it has become a tradition in our community. It is always a lot of work, but I couldn't imagine not doing it." (Boston)

from very different perspectives – for example, by pairing a law enforcement official with a mental health advocate on a "street" count team – or to offer the chance for networking between service providers and potential funders.

> **Why Does HUD Require CoCs to Collect Data On Unsheltered Homeless People?**
>
> Like many local communities, HUD and Congress believe that understanding the size and characteristics of the entire homeless population in a community – not just people using shelters – is essential to the effective planning and provision of homeless assistance and prevention services. In particular, understanding the needs and characteristics of homeless people who do not use shelters – many of whom are chronically homeless – will help communities improve their outreach to this underserved population.

The term "street count," however, is problematic when it is used to refer to all activities designed to learn about unsheltered homeless people. "Street" serves as a convenient shorthand term to refer to a wide variety of places not meant for human habitation. One can also gather information from unsheltered homeless people in ways other than searching outdoor places to find them. "Count" implies that the goal is to enumerate the total number of homeless people. Many communities, however, want more information for their efforts and choose to include an interview component.

All of the CoC representatives interviewed for this guide emphasized the great value of collecting data on unsheltered homeless people – for planning, reporting, fundraising, and public education purposes – despite the time and energy that goes into the effort.

2.2 What Have We Learned From Counting Unsheltered Homeless People?

HUD and other agencies have been funding research into the causes of homelessness and characteristics of homeless people for several decades. Much of what we know about homeless people, including people who do and do not use shelters, comes from the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC). The 1996 survey was conducted in 76 urban and rural areas across the country. This section summarizes what we have learned to date about the characteristics and needs of unsheltered homeless people, as well as the challenges associated with counting and collecting information on them.

What Do We Mean By "People Who Do Not Use Shelters"?

In order to identify homeless people who do not use shelters and include their needs in a CoC's planning, the Continuum needs to find and learn about them. Some homeless people never or rarely sleep in a shelter. At a given point in time, this group could account for as many as one-quarter to one-third of the adults who are homeless. Over the course of a year, some of these homeless people will have used shelters occasionally, but their basic living pattern is to sleep elsewhere. For purposes of counting or estimating the number of "non-shelter users," we are looking at the pattern. One or a few nights of shelter use should not qualify a person as a "shelter user," just as spending a few nights on the street when a person regularly uses shelters should not mean that a person is classified as a "street person."

Another type of non-shelter sleep pattern is the person who, often with some type of public assistance, rents a hotel or motel room for two or even three weeks a month, but then moves to the streets until the next check arrives. While such a person is not technically homeless for half the month or more, the person is chronically homeless in that he or she has not had a stable residence perhaps for years and spends about half the year, year after year, on the streets. Any CoC intent on resolving chronic homelessness, or street homelessness, will have to consider people following this pattern. Identifying people who are inconsistently housed is one reason for scheduling any counting and interviewing activity for the last week of the month, when public assistance is most likely to have run out.

Just because people do not sleep in shelters does not mean that they do not use any services. Many non-shelter services cater to homeless people who avoid the shelters. These services include street outreach teams, drop-in centers, Health Care for the Homeless networks, and both stationary (soup kitchens) and mobile (vans) food programs. One way to reach unsheltered homeless people for a count or survey is through their contacts with these service programs. In times of extreme weather, other facilities such as warming centers and temporary tent or armory shelters could also be included, and *not* counted as "shelters." There may also be pockets of homeless people known locally who do not connect to any services. In this case a special effort would be needed to cover those areas, often called "encampments." People living in RVs in parking lots along beaches are one example.

Chronic Homelessness, Disabilities, and People Who Do Not Use Shelters

Chronically homeless people will be found among homeless people that use shelters and those that do not. In two large cities that have Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS), analysis of HMIS data indicates that about 15 percent of the people who use emergency shelters take up about 50 percent of the bed-nights annually.[2] That is, they "live" in the emergency shelter system, often for years. Even communities whose emergency shelters allow no more than a seven-night stay per month will find significant numbers of people who have "lived" in the shelters for years, alternating between shelters and the streets. Because of their frequent homelessness and shelter use, many of these people will meet the definition of chronic homelessness if they are disabled (see definition below).

Chronically homeless people also comprise a high proportion of non-shelter users. Chronically homeless persons who do not use shelters regularly sleep outdoors, in abandoned buildings, at transportation hubs, in tent cities or shanty-type constructions, or in other places not meant for human habitation. Others with no home elsewhere may be living in cars, trucks, or RVs, parking where they will not be noticed. Still others may alternate between hotel or motel rooms when they can afford them and their cars or the streets when they cannot.

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[2]   Culhane, D. and R. Kuhn. (1998). Patterns and Determinants of Public Shelter Utilization Among Homeless Adults in New York City and Philadelphia. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 17 (1) 23-43.

> ### Definition of Chronic Homelessness
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> HUD's definition of chronic homelessness is:
>
> > An unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has either been continuously homeless for a year or more OR has had at least four (4) episodes of homelessness in the past three (3) years. To be considered chronically homeless, persons must have been sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g., living on the streets) and/or in emergency shelter during that time.
> > (2004 Continuum of Care application)
>
> HUD's definition of an episode of homeless is:
>
> > A separate, distinct, and sustained stay on the streets and/or in an emergency homeless shelter. (HUD's Chronic Homelessness Fact Sheet)
>
> Note that HUD's definition of chronic homelessness *does not* include families. In addition, to be identified as chronically homeless, an individual must have a *disabling condition*, defined as follows:
>
> > A diagnosable substance use disorder, serious mental illness, developmental disability, or chronic physical illness or disability, including the co-occurrence of two or more of these conditions.
> > (2004 Continuum of Care application)

Chronically homeless people are more likely than other homeless people to have one or more disabilities. Serious mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, and chronic and acute physical illnesses are common and often co-occurring. Many people with serious mental illness are afraid of both shelters and street areas where other homeless people congregate. Instead, persons with serious mental illness are frequently found along major roads and transportation corridors at the fringes of downtown areas. Further, some people who are new to homelessness may not use shelters. It is important for local planning groups to understand the characteristics and disabilities of people who are newly homeless, especially those who may become chronically homeless if appropriate interventions are not available.

Challenges to Counting People Who Do Not Use Shelters

Many challenges face a CoC as it attempts to find out about people who do not use shelters. None of these challenges is insurmountable. Each will be discussed in more detail in later chapters, in relation to different enumeration methods. All relate in one way or another to the primary challenges: how to find unsheltered people who do not use shelter and how to account for those who are difficult to find. The main issues, addressed in Chapters 3 and 4, include:

- Where to focus the count (in public places, service locations, or a combination of the two);
- When to conduct the count (day or night) and over how long a time period;
- Whom to count (that is, how to determine whether the people observed meet federal or local definitions of homelessness);

- Whether to conduct interviews to supplement the count, and, if so, whether to interview all or a sample of the people counted;
- How to avoid counting the same person twice or to correct for possible double counting once the count is complete; and
- How to present the results of the count in a way that is useful to local service providers and other stakeholders, meets the CoC's reporting needs, and addresses potential criticisms of the count.

CoCs that operate in rural or suburban areas that do not have many homeless-specific services or that cover a large geographic territory (such as a state or balance of state) face added challenges in collecting data on their unsheltered homeless populations. First, it may be difficult to determine where to look for unsheltered homeless people. Second, even if such locations can be identified, the distance and the potential remoteness of the sites may raise other challenges. Third, if the area does not have a lot of homeless service providers, as is the case in many suburban and rural areas, the staff and volunteer resources available to organize and conduct the count may be a limiting factor.

Some communities may be reluctant to participate in data collection because they believe there are no, or very few, unsheltered homeless people or chronically homeless people in their communities. This is especially true in communities where there is a policy of providing homeless people a bus ticket to the nearest city. However, at least one of the rural CoCs we interviewed for this guide noted that a major benefit of conducting a count of unsheltered homeless people was that it dispelled the myth that such people did not exist in the community.

HUD recognizes the difficulty of collecting information on unsheltered homeless people in rural areas, places with few homeless resources, and across large geographic areas. In part, the decision to require point-in-time counts every other year as a minimum standard recognizes the significant effort required to collect this data. However, just as it is important to learn about homeless people who do not use shelters as well as those who do, it is also important to learn about unsheltered homeless people outside of urban areas where they may be even more "hidden." This guide presents several methods for collecting data on unsheltered homeless people that are intended to be useful for communities in which a standard "street" count may not be feasible.

2.3   HUD Standards for Counting Homeless People

Before discussing the methods that CoCs use to count unsheltered homeless people in their jurisdictions, the following section presents recent changes in HUD requirements in this area.

Requirements for Point-in-Time Counts of Sheltered and Unsheltered Homeless People

The Continuum of Care application for McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act funding requires CoCs to produce "statistically reliable, unduplicated counts or estimates of homeless persons in sheltered and unsheltered locations at a one-day point in time" (2004 CoC application). The application also asks CoCs to describe in detail the methods used for collecting the data and the reasons for choosing those methods. Currently, CoCs are awarded points for conducting a point-in-time count at least every three years *and* describing the methodology behind the count. Beginning with the 2005 application, communities will be asked to perform a point-in-time count every other year.

> **HUD STANDARD**
> **How Often Should CoCs Conduct a Count of Unsheltered Homeless People?**
>
> Beginning in 2005, HUD requests that communities perform a point-in-time count every other year. CoCs interviewed for this guide reported that, if resources allow, it is preferable to conduct the count every year or at least every other year, since circumstances for unsheltered homeless people can change significantly from one year to the next.

For *sheltered* homeless people, CoCs are instructed to count all adults, children, and unaccompanied youth residing in emergency shelters and transitional housing, including domestic violence shelters, residential programs for runaway/homeless youth, and any hotel/motel/apartment voucher arrangements paid by a public/private agency because the person is homeless. In addition to collecting a one-day, point-in-time count of homeless individuals and families in shelters, CoCs must collect information on the number of sheltered homeless people considered to be: chronically homeless, seriously mentally ill, chronic substance abusers, veterans, persons with HIV/AIDS, victims of domestic violence, and unaccompanied youth.

For *unsheltered* homeless people, CoCs are instructed to count all adults, children, and unaccompanied youth sleeping in places not meant for human habitation, which include:

> Streets, parks, alleys, parking ramps, parts of the highway system, transportation depots and other parts of transportation systems (e.g., subway tunnels, railroad cars), all-night commercial establishments (e.g., movie theaters, laundromats, restaurants), abandoned buildings, building roofs or stairwells, chicken coops and other farm outbuildings, caves, campgrounds, vehicles, and other similar places. (2004 CoC application)

CoCs must also count or estimate the number of unsheltered homeless people who meet HUD's definition of chronic homelessness (see Section 2.2 to revisit this definition). Beginning in 2004, HUD requested that CoCs report only the number of unsheltered people actually counted at a particular point in time. In the past, many CoCs used unscientific "adjustment factors" to derive their counts of the unsheltered population – either multiplying

> **Extrapolation** is a technique for estimating the total number of unsheltered persons in your community based on the number of unsheltered persons that you have been able to observe and/or interview.

the sheltered population by a certain factor as an alternative to doing a point-in-time count, or using an adjustment factor to account for people not seen during the point-in-time count. HUD no longer allows CoCs to use such adjustment factors. Instead, CoCs can use one of two approaches. The first approach is to simply report the number of people counted. As an alternative, CoCs can use statistical sampling and extrapolation to arrive at an estimate of the number of unsheltered homeless persons. It is likely that CoCs will need outside expert advice to implement this approach. New York City's use of statistical sampling and extrapolation is described in Chapters 3 and 5.

The following box presents other pitfalls that CoCs should avoid in conducting and reporting their counts of unsheltered homeless people.

HUD STANDARD
Counting Unsheltered Homeless People: What NOT to Do

❑ **Do Not Make Unscientific "Adjustments":** Report the actual number of people counted during the point-in-time survey, not numbers adjusted to account for people who may not have been counted for one reason or another.

❑ **Do Not Base Your Numbers on Expert Opinion:** In the past, some CoCs have asked local experts, such as police and outreach providers, to estimate the number of unsheltered homeless people in the community rather than conducting a point-in-time count. In the future, HUD is asking CoCs to conduct a point-in-time count at least every other year, and not to rely on estimates from experts.

❑ **Be Careful About Overlapping Data from Multiple Counts:** Some CoCs have conducted multiple counts of unsheltered and sheltered homeless people in their communities, for example, a count of homeless youth, a count of homeless veterans, and a count of homeless people using services in addition to a shelter count. While HUD is not discouraging communities from collecting as much data as possible about homeless populations, CoCs should avoid double counting sheltered and unsheltered homeless people. This guide discusses several techniques to "unduplicate" data derived from different types of counts.

HMIS and the Future of Point-in-Time Counts

Some communities have wondered how the development of local Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) will affect the need to collect point-in-time data on sheltered and unsheltered homeless people. An HMIS is an electronic database system used to record individual-level information on an ongoing basis about all homeless persons served through local CoCs. The extent to which homeless people are included in the HMIS depends on the extent to which a wide range of service providers participate in the system. As a first priority, HUD is encouraging emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, and homeless outreach services that receive funding through the McKinney-Vento Act to

participate in their local HMIS. The second priority is to include HUD-funded permanent supportive housing and the third priority is to incorporate homelessness prevention programs and Supportive Services Only programs funded through McKinney-Vento, as well as permanent housing programs that are not federally funded.

A community in which all providers of emergency and transitional housing for homeless people participate in HMIS may not need to conduct point-in-time counts of its *sheltered* homeless population because HMIS allows the CoC to generate a count of all people in the system on a given day. However, HMIS is ultimately a system for collecting data on homeless people who use services, so there will be a need for additional data collection on homeless people who do not use shelters or other services. Homeless people who do not use shelters also tend to be less likely to use other kinds of services, including outreach services. Although data collected by outreach providers and entered into HMIS will likely provide some information on this service-resistant population, not all communities have well-developed networks of outreach providers and not all unsheltered homeless people will interact with outreach providers. As a result, periodic efforts to count and collect data on unsheltered homeless people will continue to be very important even as HMIS develops.

2.4 Approaches to Collecting Data on Unsheltered Homeless People

There are three basic approaches covered in this guide that have been implemented by communities:

Direct counts of homeless people in places not meant for human habitation:

- Simple counts done in non-shelter locations.
- Counts with an interview component.

Screening for and interviewing unsheltered homeless people at service provider locations:
- Counts based on unsheltered homeless people using non-shelter homeless services (e.g., soup kitchens) and mainstream social service agencies.

Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages. Here we briefly introduce the options to be discussed in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

Simple Street Counts

Many communities have organized a simple "street" count at one time or other, and a few communities have a long history of repeated "street" counts that date back two decades or more. Simple "street" counts are easy to understand, relatively easy to organize (especially after the first one), and the results are easy to summarize. The main shortcoming of simple "street" counts is that they invariably miss some people, which tempts organizers to "estimate" the population missed without a reliable basis to make that estimate. Further, simple "street" counts do not provide comprehensive, in-depth information. Because "street" counts tend to be done quickly with minimal interaction with the people counted, they are

generally limited to collecting numbers and locations of unsheltered homeless people, although in some cases information on gender, race, and age may be collected.

Street Count with an Interview Component

A somewhat more advanced method is adding an interview component to a "street" count. Here the enumerators either interview everyone they count or interview every nth person to create a simple random sample of the people counted. Interviews give organizers more information about unsheltered homeless people. Without interview information communities will not be able to accomplish several things that HUD is encouraging or requiring:

- Ensure people have not been counted twice;
- Develop estimates of the number of people who may have been homeless over the course of the year; and
- Differentiate among people who are chronically homeless and those who are not.

Interviews can be used to obtain personal identifying information and to learn about recent shelter and service use patterns, both of which can help with obtaining an unduplicated count of homeless persons in your community and other important types of estimates. Interviews can also tell you something about the person's homeless history and disability status, from which you can identify whether the person is chronically homeless, what services he or she uses, and what it would take to help the person to leave homelessness.

Screening and Interviewing Homeless People at Service Provider Locations

While the simple "street" count and the count with an interview component may be done without having any knowledge of the types of programs and services that assist unsheltered homeless people, they are likely to miss many unsheltered homeless people. An alternative to the "street" count is using service programs to help access homeless people who do not use shelters and who may not be readily found in public places. These programs would most likely include homeless-specific services such as Health Care for the Homeless networks, drop-in centers, street outreach teams, and soup kitchens and other food-related programs. The programs might also include those provided by mainstream agencies such as welfare or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), health, mental health, substance abuse, community action, and other agencies that are likely to come into contact with homeless people in areas that have few or no homeless-specific programs.