

Guidance for Counting Unaccompanied Homeless Children During 2011 Point-in-Time Counts of Homeless People

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funds local homeless assistance planning networks called Continuums of Care (CoCs). The primary responsibility of a CoC is to organize and deliver housing and services for people who are homeless in each community. HUD requires CoCs to undertake a community-wide effort to collect information on the number and characteristics of individuals and families experiencing homelessness on a single night. These one-night counts, called point-in-time (PIT) counts, must be conducted at least every other year (in odd calendar years) during the last ten days in January. The PIT count also includes estimates of particular homeless subpopulations, such as chronically homeless people, veterans, and unaccompanied children.

Planning for the 2011 count is already underway in many communities. This guidance is meant to assist communities in planning for the upcoming count. It begins by highlighting the importance of PIT counts and reviews HUD's changes to counting unaccompanied homeless children (previously called "unaccompanied youth"). It also offers specific approaches and strategies for fostering collaborations between CoC staff and youth services providers to ensure that all unaccompanied children are counted.

Why is the PIT Count Important?

Collecting accurate data on the number and characteristics of individuals and families experiencing homelessness is a critical part of local homeless planning and program development. Having accurate data on both the sheltered and unsheltered homeless population can help communities:

- Understand changes in trends among homeless populations;
- Adjust the types of programs and services available according to need and use resources as efficiently as possible;
- Justify requests for additional resources and/or programming modifications;
- Comply with the reporting requirements of federal agencies, other funders, and local stakeholders;
- Raise public awareness about the issue of homelessness; and
- Measure the community's progress towards preventing and ending homelessness.

On a national level, federal agencies and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness have jointly endorsed a national strategic goal of preventing and ending homelessness among children, youth, and families in 10 years. The federal government is increasingly using HUD's PIT data and the longitudinal data collected by Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) as the primary sources to understand changes in homeless trends and track progress in eliminating homelessness. These data are reported annually in the congressionally-mandated Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR). The report describes the number and characteristics of people experiencing homelessness in the U.S., as well as trends in these data since 2007.

Changes to Counting Homeless Unaccompanied Children

For many years, HUD has required communities to collect information on unaccompanied youth who stay in emergency shelters or transitional housing facilities (i.e., sheltered unaccompanied youth). HUD has defined an unaccompanied youth as any person under age 18 who presented for services alone.

For the 2011 PIT count, HUD is relabeling the “unaccompanied youth” category to “unaccompanied children.” The definition of an unaccompanied child has not changed. HUD decided to change the terminology to clarify that its definition only refers to a person who is under age 18.

HUD recognizes that some service providers use a broader age range to define “youth”—e.g., persons who are 24 years old or younger. Communities have the discretion to use a broader definition of “youth” for local program planning or reporting to other funders. However, for the purposes of HUD reporting, CoCs must be able to report separately on unaccompanied homeless children who are under age 18. Defining youth as under age 18 allows HUD to use the same definition for all reporting related to homeless programs.

Counting Unaccompanied Homeless Children

Counting sheltered and unsheltered unaccompanied children can be challenging. For the sheltered count, unaccompanied children often choose not to use homeless residential services and thus never appear in local HMIS or develop relationships with local providers who can ensure that each child is counted.

The challenges to counting the number of unaccompanied children who are unsheltered are even greater. Unaccompanied children may hide from providers and the police during a community’s street count because they are minors. Also, homeless children may congregate in different areas and at different hours of the day than older individuals experiencing homelessness. Lastly, enumerators may be required to conduct interviews to verify the age and household composition of a person who appears to be an unaccompanied child.

How Can CoCs and Homeless Youth Providers Collaborate?

The challenges to accurately counting homeless children suggest that CoCs should develop specific strategies and approaches to overcoming these issues. Forming partnerships with organizations that serve unaccompanied children and youth can be an effective strategy. For example, CoCs can:

- 1. *Engage youth shelters and service organizations.*** For the sheltered count, CoC representatives should coordinate with providers throughout the community to identify all providers that offer residential services to children and youth. The organizations may include federally-funded agencies, drop-in centers, street outreach programs, and transitional living programs, as well as local churches or other private providers that offer services to homeless children and youth. CoCs

should also communicate with adult shelters prior to the PIT count to ensure that all unaccompanied children under age 18 are identified as such during the count.

- 2. *Recruit currently or formerly homeless youth.*** For the unsheltered count, communities that have successful strategies for conducting counts of unsheltered children and youth often enlist homeless or formerly homeless teenagers and young adults to assist with the count. Prior to the count, these groups can help identify the areas where unaccompanied youth may be staying or congregating. They can also conduct interviews during the count with a better chance of receiving complete and accurate information.

Continuum of Care representatives interested in reaching out to youth providers in their community can view the Federal government's Find Youth website at <http://findyouthinfo.gov> to obtain information on local providers.

Youth providers interested in participating in their community's PIT count are encouraged to reach out to their Continuum of Care. CoC contact information can be found on HUD's website at <http://www.hudhre.info/index.cfm?do=viewCocContacts>.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness has developed a short guide on counting homeless youth, which can be found at <http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/3475>

Questions About the PIT Count or Collecting Data about Unaccompanied Homeless Youth?

Questions about the PIT count should be submitted to Virtual Help Desk (insert hyperlink <http://www.hudhre.info/helpdesk/index.cfm?do=viewHelpdesk>) on HUD's HRE (hudhre.info). Select HDX as program/system and PIT as topic and subtopic. Select topic HDX, and subtopic PIT