



Conducting the 2021 Unsheltered PIT Count

To maximize safety but allow for sufficient data collection to understand basic trends among people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, HUD is providing the following flexibilities for the 2021 unsheltered PIT.

Safety Basics:

During the PIT count, adhere to the following COVID-19 safety basics.

- Decrease face-to-face interaction with clients
- Decrease the number of volunteers who need to work in physical proximity
- Provide personal protective equipment for volunteers
- Design volunteer processes that minimize close contact

Data Collection Considerations

Exception Allowance: HUD will allow CoCs to request an exception to some or all of the unsheltered PIT count requirements. CoCs can request an exception to only conduct a head count of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness (i.e., not data collection on demographics, subpopulation, or household characteristics) or to collect some but not all of the data elements HUD has required in the past count. CoCs that cannot conduct the full 2021 unsheltered PIT count must submit a request for an exception to William Snow (William.Snow@hud.gov) that describes:

1. Why the CoC cannot conduct a full unsheltered PIT count,
2. Whether the CoC is requesting an exception to some or all of the requirements of the unsheltered PIT count;
3. If the CoC is conducting a count, what exactly will be included in the count (e.g., a head count only); and
4. Other efforts they are taking to understand the needs of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in their community.

CoCs do NOT need to submit an exception request if they plan on submitting the full unsheltered PIT count data but are changing their methodology. For example, if a CoC is shifting to an observation-based count or is changing their sampling methods, the CoC does not need to request an exception. CoCs that have questions about changes they want to make can review the guidance, attend office hours, or submit an [Ask A Question](#) (AAQ) via the HUD Exchange.

Methodology Change: CoCs can change their normal PIT count methodology to maximize safety during the PIT count. Choose a safe option for data collection:

1. ***Observation-only Counts:*** CoCs could choose to conduct blitz or observation counts late at night or early in the morning to identify the number of people sleeping in unsheltered situations. To minimize the potential for duplication this should be done in one day. However, in CoCs where the homeless populations do not move across boundaries within the CoC, CoCs could conduct observation counts over multiple days. For instance, if there are 2 counties in a CoC and people



experiencing homelessness don't tend to move across the two counties, the CoC could choose to conduct a count in one county on one night and another county the next night.

2. **Brief Survey Counts:** CoCs could choose to conduct a short survey with people in places not meant for human habitation to determine if a person was experiencing homelessness on the night designated for the unsheltered PIT count. For example, if a CoC chooses to use January 25 as its PIT count date, it could conduct this very short survey at any hour of the day over several days. To maximize safety, HUD does not recommend adding questions beyond those a CoC would need to de-duplicate and confirm that someone was experiencing homelessness on the night of the count. This survey could be limited to a person's name and housing status on the date of the count.

Longer Counting Timeframe: CoCs are generally limited to conducting their count in a 7-day window if they are using an interview approach and a 1- or 2-day period if they are using an observation approach. HUD will extend the allowable counting period to 14 days. For CoCs with larger geographies that have limited movement across the geography, the CoC could conduct observation count over several days. For CoCs using the brief survey, they could count up to 14 days instead of 7. Extending the count timeline to 14 days gives CoCs a longer timeframe to conduct the count with less reliance on volunteers. Anything longer than 14 days raises concerns about a person's ability to recall where they were sleeping on a given night.

Sampling: HUD encourages CoCs to use sampling to conduct their counts. Prior to the count, CoCs will need to identify areas that have different homeless population densities and group them accordingly (these groups are referred to as strata). This may be as simple as high density areas and low density areas or may include gradations of density. HUD will release guidance on sampling for more detail on how communities can approach the use of sampling to conduct the unsheltered count. HUD recommends that CoCs work with statistical experts (e.g. university staff) to develop, implement, and analyze the count.

HMIS or Other Unsheltered Data: Some CoCs currently collect data on the unsheltered population throughout the year. These data may be collected in their Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) or in another database. CoCs that use a complete by-name-list, or active list, that frequently update their list (at least monthly) could use that data in lieu of conducting an unsheltered PIT count. CoCs that choose to do this should consider when they last updated their data and how complete their outreach is to areas that do not traditionally have people experiencing homelessness. CoCs desiring to use these data will need to send an email to William Snow (William.Snow@hud.gov) stating what data they want to use and demonstrating why they believe the data accurately reflects the unsheltered population, including persons in all subpopulation groups experiencing unsheltered homelessness. For instance, the CoC could run the data on the date of the last unsheltered PIT count and demonstrate the total result was within 5 percent of the unsheltered PIT count reported to HUD in that year.

Mobile Counting Applications: For the past several years, several CoCs have used mobile technology to complete their unsheltered PIT counts. The mobile technology has allowed greater planning using GIS to regularly update where people are sleeping. Mobile technology requires less physical interaction with other people. CoCs that use mobile technology do not need to distribute printed maps or surveys



to volunteers. Rather, volunteers can download the mobile application at home on their personal device and use that for the count. Mobile applications generally have a resource section that volunteers can use as a refresher on how to safely and accurately count. Mobile applications often allow quick feedback for CoCs to determine if data are complete.

Other Considerations

Remote PIT Count Training: To limit social interactions, HUD recommends that CoCs maximize use of remote training options. This allows volunteers to train on the own time, at their own pace, and in their own space. However, it increases the likelihood that volunteers will not pay full attention or fully absorb the material. To increase the effectiveness of remote training options HUD recommends CoCs:

1. *Keep the training under 20 minutes.* With the other modifications listed above, a 20-minute training that focuses on safely identifying people experiencing homelessness and how to submit the collected data is feasible.
2. *Include a short quiz.* The quiz should be short (no more than 5 questions) and not be difficult. The CoC should give the volunteer the correct answers, with an explanation for why the answer was correct, and allow a volunteer to take the quiz unlimited times.
3. *Provide a point of contact.* The CoC should provide a point of contact who can answer questions about how and where to count.

Volunteers: Conducting unsheltered PIT counts in many CoCs requires a large number of volunteers. Many CoCs rely on volunteers that are 55 and older as well as post-secondary students, which are less likely to participate due to the COVID-19. HUD discourages CoCs from using volunteers that are at high risk of contracting COVID-19, including persons age 65 or older, to physically count. If your CoC has people that want to volunteer but are in a high risk group, HUD encourages you to determine if there are other ways to use their services that minimize their exposure (e.g., entering data from surveys collected), or to politely decline their assistance this year. Also, many colleges and universities are allowing virtual learning which is limiting the number of students in communities that would ordinarily participate in the counts. CoCs can still reach out to their local colleges and universities to see if there is a way to mobilize students that are studying virtually. Communities are encouraged to engage their volunteer bases, taking into consideration those groups that are considered higher risk populations. Remote trainings and physical distancing may mean new volunteers may express interest in participating.

Homeless Service Provider Staff: Many homeless service providers are understaffed and have maximized their current staff capacity. If an unsheltered PIT count is conducted, CoCs will likely rely heavily on homeless service provider staff to serve as enumerators. Homeless service providers could partner to coordinate multi-day counts, leveraging the work they are already doing with unsheltered populations to understand where people were sleeping on the night of the count. This additional requirement to count may be too much for providers that simply cannot take on another task.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): CoCs conducting counts will need to ensure that all volunteers have some PPE. CoCs should ask all volunteers to bring masks and wear them for the duration of the



count and other volunteer efforts. CoCs should be prepared to provide masks to all volunteers as well as hand sanitizer. HUD recommends that all volunteers conducting the count bring masks to provide to those they are interviewing. In areas that have high to moderate COVID-19 cases, HUD recommends that CoCs supply N95 masks to all persons involved in the count. Depending on the level of community transmission of COVID-19, CoCs should consider whether to also provide gloves, face shields, N95 masks, or other PPE. CoCs will have to work with their local public health authority to ensure they provide adequate PPE for conducting a safe count.

Social distancing: CoCs will need to conduct counts in compliance with social distancing principles which recommends remaining at least 6 feet apart. CoCs should create small counting teams, with only two or three volunteers per team. These teams should maintain at least six feet from one another other as well as people experiencing homelessness.

Health precautions: To prevent the risk of spreading COVID-19, CoCs should recommend that any volunteer be tested for COVID-19 prior to participation in the count no more than 7 days prior, or at least screen for symptoms and check temperatures. CoCs should encourage volunteers to stay home if they have any symptoms and plan for volunteer absences. CoCs should also recommend volunteers observe for symptoms for up to 14 days after the count and consider getting tested for COVID-19. Many states and communities have created contact tracing applications so that people understand who they have come in contact with in the event they, or someone they interacted with, tested positive for COVID-19. CoCs should consider requiring or at least suggesting that enumerators download that application if one is available in the jurisdiction they are counting in.

Partnerships: CoCs should work closely with public health and health care partners to conduct the PIT count. Partnering with Health Care for the Homeless providers and the public health authority will give CoCs needed insight about safely conducting the unsheltered PIT count and may provide additional access to health resources to conduct the count.

HUD is committed to keeping people experiencing homelessness and those who serve them safe. HUD also feels that understanding basic trend data on unsheltered homelessness is critical to enhancing our ability to better address this important population.