3.2 Review Data about Homelessness in Your Community

To plan effectively, you need to know the scope and nature of homelessness in your community. How many people do you need to account for? What are their demographics (ages, family status) and needs? Where are they currently living? Your CoC can help you gather this information from existing sources and their own experience. To understand the scope and nature of homelessness in your jurisdiction, you should review readily available data in community sources such as HMIS, HIC/PIT, AHAR and your Con Plan. Consult your local data expert and/or your CoC for assistance. See also the Overview of Homelessness Data Sources.

At a minimum . . .

Understand the need. 10? 100? 1000? 10000? The scale of homelessness varies in each community. Some communities, like New York City or Los Angeles, have tens of thousands of homeless families and individuals; whereas a rural community may have less than 100. While the scale may vary, often there are some common trends in needs. Understanding both the frequently identified needs and the total number of people will prepare you to plan effectively. Note this data changes over time and may change seasonally.

The basic data includes[1]:

- The total number of homeless persons,
- The total number of individuals, and
- The total number of families and persons in families.

Keep in mind that after a disaster there will probably be a significant number of new homeless people who were doubled up or couch surfing and who may not be defined as "pre-disaster housed" in the mainstream response. Make sure you account for them and their needs. McKinney-Vento school data in some jurisdictions can provide an indication of families with such insecure housing although it tends to undercount.

Understand the locations you will need to address. The process of thinking through where you will find homeless people is essential to your planning. Do you have large wooded areas, river banks, encampments? Are there night-only shelters that put people on nearby on the streets during the day?

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[1] Note that HUD-funded projects use their HMIS to understand how a unique individual accesses the homeless service system. While CoCs can report, at an aggregate level, the number of unique individuals and families accessing a project, obtaining identified data requires special authorization.

For a more robust effort . . .

A more robust effort will explore the characteristics of the homeless and their needs. This data is also readily available in existing data systems. Remember that the CoC has multiple data sources to get the most accurate numbers but other sources may be useful as well. For example, local schools can provide a count of homeless students.

This data includes information such as:

- The total number of persons sleeping on the streets and in places not meant for human habitation;

- The total number of persons in emergency shelters; and

- The total number of persons in transitional housing.

You should also review the ages of the homeless populations and the numbers of individuals with special needs, such as mental illness, chronic substance use disorders, victims of domestic violence, and runaway and homeless youth. In addition, consider special language needs.

The best data collection will include . . .

The best data collection efforts will further explore the actual locations of homeless people and service providers. Ideally, existing client and service location data could be used to produce a map to target recovery efforts. Consider:

- The locations of persons sleeping on the street (work with street outreach providers, police, and other homeless service providers);[2]

- The locations of emergency shelters;

- The locations of transitional housing, permanent housing,[3] and other housing.

Work with HMIS experts, the CoC, and PHAs to obtain and map this data. Note that some domestic violence shelters do not want their locations publicized, so you should be aware of this and work with them.

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[2] Some communities have begun to regulate persistent encampments of homeless individuals. Emergency planners should coordinate on likely flood zones and other vulnerabilities to ensure encampments minimize all possible risks.

[3] Many CoCs use a scattered site project model that places subsidized units in neighborhoods throughout a community. From an emergency planning perspective this may limit a resident's knowledge of local landmarks, hazards, and evacuation routes. Project staff and emergency planners may want to consider simple guides that can be issued to participants or permanent signage within a unit.