Unsheltered Point-in-Time (PIT) Count Observation Guidance

Continuums of Care (CoCs) can use an observation-based approach to conduct their unsheltered Point-in-Time (PIT) counts. Whether a CoC is conducting a full census unsheltered count (i.e., counting people experiencing homelessness in every area of the CoC) or using a random sampling method (i.e., randomly selecting a subset of areas in which to count), observations are an approved data collection approach. This document includes general PIT count observation guidance and an example PIT count observation form a CoC could use or amend to suit their local PIT count process. A Word version of this example observation form is also published on the HUD Exchange PIT Count Survey Tools page. For more information on the variety of approved approaches to conducting unsheltered counts, see the *PIT Count Methodology Guide*.

CoCs using observations to conduct PIT count activities form should take the following into consideration.

Observation Timing

Given that observation-based PIT count activities do not include verbal or physical interaction between people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and those conducting the PIT count, PIT count observations should only take place at nighttime on the night designated for the PIT count, preferably between the hours of 10pm and 6am. This allows enumerators some amount of certainty that the people observed are experiencing unsheltered homelessness. It is impossible to determine whether someone was experiencing homelessness on a prior night just by looking at them, so observations should not be used with a post-night-of-the-count approach. Similarly, one cannot assume that because a person was experiencing unsheltered homelessness on one night, they would also be experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the future, so observation-based counts should not be conducted before the designated PIT date.

Demographics

PIT count observations allow CoCs to count the total number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in a given area (i.e., conduct a "head count"). However, because it is not feasible to determine someone's demographic characteristics just by looking at them (e.g., determining race or gender), HUD highly recommends not using observations to collect demographic PIT count data. CoCs that use outreach teams or other staff to conduct observation-based counts may rely on staff knowledge of people observed to collect demographic information, if staff are certain they know the person observed (e.g., street outreach staff that have regular contact with those being counted).

Observation Form Components

At a minimum, PIT count observation forms must include space for enumerators to document:

- **Observations that will assist the CoC in determining the person's housing status** (i.e., whether they were experiencing homelessness and should be included in the PIT count). The example form in this document includes questions about what the person is doing (e.g., sleeping) and the time of the observation to help document the person's housing status.
- **Observations that will aid in deduplication** (i.e., making sure each person is only counted once). The example form in this document includes questions about the person's exact location, appearance, possessions, companion animals, and the time of the observation to support deduplication.

Forms may also include:

- Space for outreach or other workers to fill in demographic information about clients they know
- The observer's name to support the CoC in knowing who to contact with any follow-up questions during data cleaning
- Something like a form number for each person counted. To assign a unique identifier to each survey, the example form in this document includes an **Observation #** field that a CoC could train volunteers to fill in using a locally specific method (e.g., assign each team a letter and ask them to count up as they complete the forms – A1, A2, A3, A4, etc.) or that the CoC could pre-fill before the PIT count.

PIT Count Enumerator Training

It is important that the staff and volunteers responsible for conducting the PIT count know the level of detail to provide in the PIT count observation form and understand how each piece of information will be used to validate each form's inclusion in the PIT count. This will assist the CoC in determining which forms to include in the PIT count during the data cleaning process.

For additional considerations in developing and delivering PIT count enumerator training materials, see the *PIT Count Volunteer Training Toolkit*.

Example PIT Count Observation Form

Please complete one form for each person observed.

Observation #: _____

Name of person completing this form: _____

Date: _____ **Exact time of observation:** _____

Exact location (e.g., east side of Main St. between Broadway and 1st; on bench in SW corner of X Park):

_____

Number of people observed in household: _____ □ Unsure of the number of people to count

    If unsure: Why are you unsure?_____
    (e.g., in a closed tent)

    If more than 1: Which form ***Observation #(s)*** should be counted with this person's? _____

Description of person: Please include details about any **physical appearance** (e.g., long dark hair; grey beard), **clothing** (e.g., black down coat), **unique identifiers** (e.g., visible tattoos), **possessions** (e.g., navy blue hiking backpack, orange tent), or **companion animals** you observe.

    Physical Appearance:_____

    Clothing:_____

    Unique identifiers:_____

    Possessions:_____

    Companion animals:_____

    Other:_____

Is the person sleeping? □ Yes □ No

    If no: Why do you think they may be experiencing homelessness?

    _____

Do you know any demographic information about this person?

    □ **No**–I have never met this person. *Please **do not** fill in demographic information in the box below.*
    □ **Yes**–I know this person. *Please fill in known demographic information in the box below.*

Age: □ Under 18 □ 18—24 □ 25 or older	
Gender: □ Male □ Female □ Transgender	□ Gender non-binary or non-conforming
Ethnicity: □ Non-Hispanic/Non-Latino	□ Hispanic/Latino
Race: □ White □ Black or African-American	□ Asian American Indian or Alaska Native
□ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	□ Multiple Races