

## 5 MYTHS about PIT COUNTS<sup>i</sup>

February 2014

**Myth 1: Point-in-Time counts do not count every homeless person and therefore are inaccurate.**

**PIT counts are a solid count of people experiencing homelessness in shelters, transitional housing, and on the street, in cars, in abandoned buildings, and in other places not intended for human habitation.**

People experiencing homelessness in unsheltered locations are particularly difficult to find and enumerate. The PIT counts do miss people, as do most censuses. Nevertheless, PIT counts are important. They are the ONLY measure that captures the scope of people experiencing homelessness who are unsheltered – living on the streets, in cars, in abandoned buildings, and other places not meant for human habitation. And, by using the same methodology every year, PIT counts allow a community to assess the relative size of the homeless population over time.

**Myth 2: Other national statistics contradict the data presented in Point-in-Time counts.**

**There are several national data sources on homelessness, but they do not cover the same population over the same time period, and subsequently cannot be directly compared to the PIT count.**

PIT counts cover all people sheltered in homeless programs and unsheltered on a given night. They are conducted in every community, and are required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD also requires communities to collect data on people in homeless programs over the course of a year via Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS). The Department of Education (Education) counts children who are enrolled in school and living in shelter, unsheltered situations, hotels and motels, and doubled up with family or friends during the school year. The U.S. Census Bureau includes a measure for people experiencing homelessness in the decennial Census.

These measures examine different populations over different time periods using different methodologies and cannot be directly compared. They have, however, tended to show similar trends over time. For example, between 2012 and 2013, both the PIT count and the Education data showed that the number of people who live in shelters, transitional housing, and unsheltered has gone down.

**Myth 3: Point-in-Time counts are meant to provide data on everyone who is homeless during a year.**

**PIT counts are intended to provide a snapshot of how many people are homeless on a given night.**

PIT counts provide the number of people living in emergency shelters, transitional housing, and unsheltered locations in a community. They provide little detailed information about the characteristics of who experiences homelessness over time in a community. Communities can glean more information on homelessness over the course of a year by examining the data collected in HMIS.

Data from HMIS, however, does not provide information about the scope of unsheltered homelessness. PIT counts are uniquely valuable in that respect.

**Myth 4: Fluctuations in the Point-in-Time counts simply reflect fluctuations in the number of shelter beds – not in the number of homeless people.**

**The PIT counts reflect the interaction among people in beds, people unsheltered, and utilization of beds.**

PIT counts can be affected by the number of beds, but they also count people who are not sheltered reflecting the entire population of people who are literally homeless. PIT counts also reflect the varying utilization of beds (i.e., they sometimes go unused). For example, in 2013 the number of shelter and transitional housing beds went down, but the number of people in those beds went up meaning vacancy was reduced.

**Myth 5: If the Point-in-Time count is down, it means that there is enough affordable housing in the community.**

**The PIT describes how the homeless system is managing people’s experience of the shortage of affordable housing – not the availability of that housing.**

The PIT count does not describe the affordable housing crisis. For that, a community should examine how many affordable units there are for the number of extremely low income households, the number of households that are doubled up, and the percentage of income that people pay for rent, among other things. Data on these measures is available from HUD and the U.S. Census Bureau.

---

<sup>i</sup> A Point-in-Time count is a one-night, unduplicated count of people experiencing homelessness in a Continuum of Care (CoC). HUD requires that CoCs count their sheltered homeless population every year. They require that CoCs count their unsheltered homeless population every other year, on odd numbered calendar years. In 2012, despite not being required, 67 percent of CoCs conducted an unsheltered count. CoCs are expected to conduct their count during the last 10 days of January.