

Frequently Asked Questions: Family Homelessness

What are the sources of data?

The data used in these data snapshots are derived from the [2018 Annual Homeless Assessment Report: Part 1 PIT Estimates of Homelessness in the U.S.](#) (AHAR) which was released by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in December 2018. Supplemental reports provide data for each state and Continuum of Care (CoC). Each year, localities report the number of individuals residing in an emergency shelter, transitional housing program, or in a place not intended for human habitation on a single night. The numbers in this tableau reflect the number of families identified as experiencing homelessness on a single night in January 2018 and the existing housing inventory.

Why don't these numbers match other figures I have heard about family and child homelessness?

The Point-in-Time (PIT) is one of several measures of homelessness in general use. A summary of each can be found below.

- The PIT measure enumerates individuals and families who are in a temporary (emergency shelter or transitional housing program) or identified in a place not intended for human habitation on a single night. The PIT provides a one-day snapshot of homelessness and is the only measure that includes an extensive effort (requiring thousands of hours of volunteer work) to identify those living without shelter, including in outdoor locations, cars, abandoned buildings, or other places not intended for human habitation.
- HUD requires local grantees to submit information about each person served in a homeless service program (e.g. emergency shelter or transitional housing) over the course of a year. The most recent information can be found in the [2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report: Part 2 Estimates of Homelessness in the United States](#) which was released by HUD in October 2018. The AHAR Part 2 does not capture individuals experiencing homelessness who never connect with a homeless service program but does provide a reliable measure of those who enter and exit homeless service programs and provides an analysis of how those programs are used.
- The Department of Education (ED) releases data annually on children identified by homeless school liaisons over the course of a school year. The [ED data](#) includes children who are unsheltered, living in a homeless service program (emergency shelter or transitional housing), children whose parents are paying to stay in a hotel/motel, and children in doubled up families – those living with extended family or friends due to economic necessity. According to the most recent ED data, over one million children live in doubled up situations. If doubled up living arrangements become untenable, those families may turn to homeless service systems for a place to stay.

Why would families be unsheltered if there are more temporary housing units for families available at a point-in-time than families who are experiencing homelessness?

There are a few reasons that there may seem to be a surplus of temporary housing stock (emergency shelter or transitional housing) while families remain unsheltered and policymakers should investigate what contributes to any discrepancy that exists in their state or locality. It may be that existing units are simply located far from where families are experiencing homelessness. Emergency shelters and transitional housing programs may have program entry requirements that are difficult for some families to navigate or programs may require family members to be housed separately (e.g. older male children or fathers housed apart from mother and other children). Newly homeless families may be intimidated by the idea of staying in an emergency shelter and feel more secure in their own car or in a familiar campground. Whatever the reason, it is important for state and local leaders to understand the factors that contribute to unsheltered family homelessness when temporary capacity is available, so action can be taken to minimize future incidences of unsheltered child and family homelessness.

If there are more Rapid Re-housing (RRH) units at a PIT than families experiencing homelessness, will all families who are homeless receive Rapid Re-housing?

Not necessarily. The data tells us how many units of Rapid Re-housing are in a homeless service system's inventory at a point-in-time. The measure more accurately reflects the number of families assisted with Rapid Re-housing on the night of the PIT count. Providers must ensure those resources are being used efficiently so that as families transition off Rapid Re-housing assistance, resources remain for other homeless families. Since Rapid Re-housing inventory is captured only at a point-in-time, contrasting it with the number of families homeless at a point-in-time becomes the best available metric. Certainly, families in states and localities with a very limited Rapid Re-housing inventory relative to the number of families experiencing homelessness will be less likely to receive re-housing assistance than families in states and localities that have made more substantial investments in Rapid Re-housing.

Why is it that PIT data suggests that family homelessness is declining when local providers report that they are serving more families than ever before?

The PIT count measures how many families are *homeless* on a given day. Increasingly, homeless service providers are assisting *housed* families. This includes families diverted from homelessness and those who have exited shelter and are now receiving housing stabilization services in their own housing. In addition, when homeless service providers help families exit homeless service programs faster, they often find they can increase the number of families they assist annually, because other families are able to enter the temporary housing units that the families exited. As a result, providers may see the number of families experiencing homelessness at a point-in-time decrease while the number of families they assist annually increase.

Improving Performance

Does anything less than 100 percent temporary housing capacity mean jurisdictions should increase shelter capacity?

Not necessarily. There are several ways to address capacity shortages. Jurisdictions have found that investing resources in helping to *divert* families from homelessness can result in fewer families entering shelter. This can significantly lessen the demand for shelter and free up space for those who lack alternatives. Similarly, helping families exit homelessness more quickly can also free up temporary housing capacity so emergency shelter and transitional housing can be used to assist other families in need. State and local leaders may use temporary housing capacity gaps as a starting point for discussions around how to expand temporary housing capacity that should include assessing how to reduce *inflow* into homeless service systems and expedite *exits* to permanent housing.

How can localities reduce unsheltered family homelessness?

One key strategy is to ensure that *existing* temporary housing units are being fully utilized to meet the needs of families. Are emergency shelter or transitional housing units going unused near where families are experiencing homelessness? If so, are there policies emergency shelter and transitional housing programs can adopt to improve access for families currently experiencing unsheltered homelessness? Is outreach required to unsheltered families to facilitate their connection to shelter and interventions to reconnect to housing? If there are not enough units available to accommodate all families, localities may also explore strategies to reduce demand for shelter and expedite exit strategies while also assessing the viability of expanding emergency shelter options.