National Alliance to End Homelessness

Unsheltered Homelessness

Trends, Causes, and Strategies to Address

JUNE 2017

People sleeping on park benches and street corners are the most visual reminder of the United States' continuing struggle with homelessness. On any given night, over 175,000 people are unsheltered, sleeping outside or in places not meant for human habitation. On a positive note, unsheltered homelessness has been declining nationally for several years, but some jurisdictions, particularly some large cities, report increases. What is behind high or increasing unsheltered counts? And, what do we know about unsheltered homelessness that may guide strategies to end it?

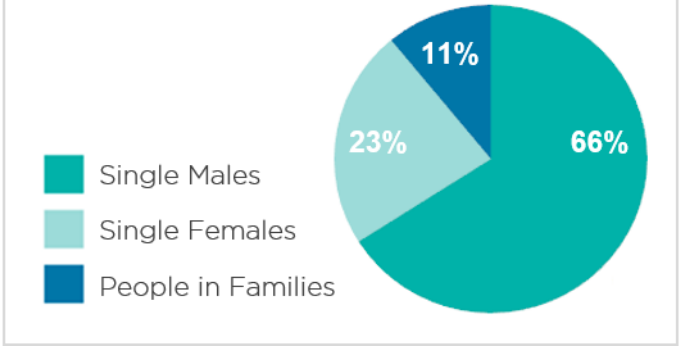
This brief provides a snapshot of unsheltered homelessness in the U.S., analyzes national and local trends, discusses possible causes of high rates or increasing counts, and makes recommendations for improving policies and practices. Data are from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development,[1] U.S. Census Bureau, survey responses from communities with large or increasing unsheltered populations,[2] and learnings from meetings of the Alliance's Leadership Council and Research Council.

Unsheltered Homelessness in the U.S.

On a single night in 2016, 176,357 people were unsheltered in the U.S., meaning sleeping outside, in a car, or in another place not meant for human habitation. Two thirds (66 percent) of those sleeping outside were single males, 23 percent single females, and 11 percent people in families with children (see Figure 1). As the overwhelming majority, this brief will focus largely on unsheltered individuals.

FIGURE 1

UNSHELTERED HOMELESSNESS BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE, 2016



[1] Point in Time Counts. Data are submitted by Continuums of Care (CoCs), regional coordinating bodies for homeless assistance.

[2] A survey was sent to 80 CoC lead agencies that represent jurisdictions that reported a large or increasing number of unsheltered individuals. 45 CoCs responded to the survey representing a 56 percent response rate. Special efforts were made to ensure large metropolitan areas were included in the responses. Survey questions asked about the demographic characteristics and behavior patterns of unsheltered individuals and community and program policies.

Of all people experiencing homelessness, individuals experiencing chronic homelessness, that is prolonged homelessness among people with a disability, are the most likely to be unsheltered (see Figure 2), with more than half of that subpopulation unsheltered on a given night. Unaccompanied youth and single adults are also at particular risk of being unsheltered as they are almost as likely to be unsheltered as they are to be sheltered. People who are homeless as part of a family household are the least likely to be unsheltered.

In sum, single individuals, including unaccompanied youth, veterans, and chronically homeless individuals, account for a combined 89 percent of the unsheltered people on a given night. Individuals are more likely to be unsheltered in western and southern communities than in the northeast or Midwest[3] (see Figure 3) with unsheltered homelessness concentrated in a handful of states: California (44% of unsheltered people are in CA), Florida (9%), Washington (5%), Oregon (5%), and Texas (4%).

Large metropolitan areas contain the highest numbers of unsheltered people. The five most populous metropolitan areas account for 27 percent of unsheltered individuals. 22 percent of all unsheltered individuals are in or around Los Angeles (see Figure 4). Of the 29 most populous metropolitan areas in the U.S., the

FIGURE 2

PERCENT UNSHELTERED OF MAJOR SUBPOPULATIONS, 2016

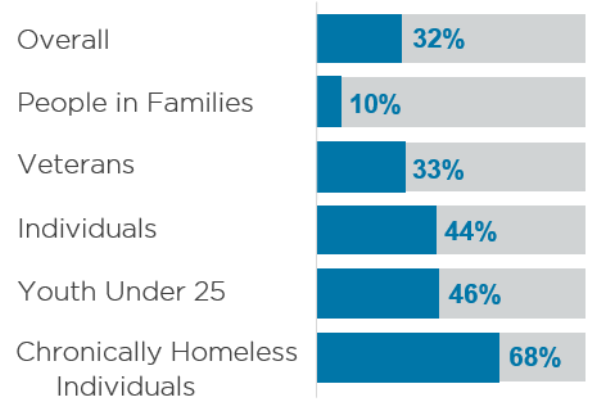


FIGURE 3

PERCENT OF HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS THAT IS UNSHELTERED BY REGION, 2016

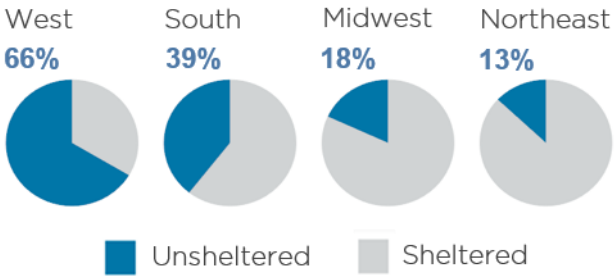
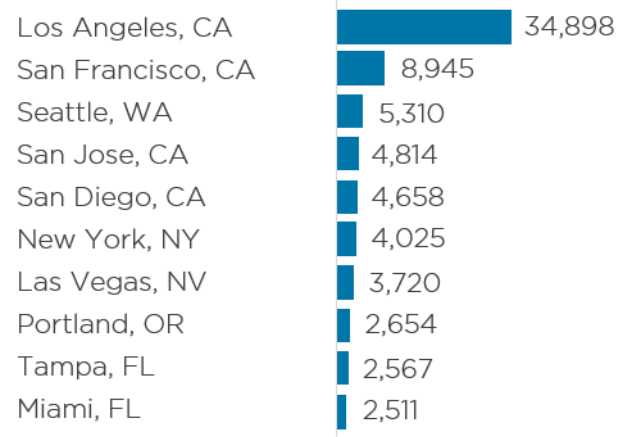


FIGURE 4

METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREAS WITH THE MOST UNSHELTERED INDIVIDUALS, 2016



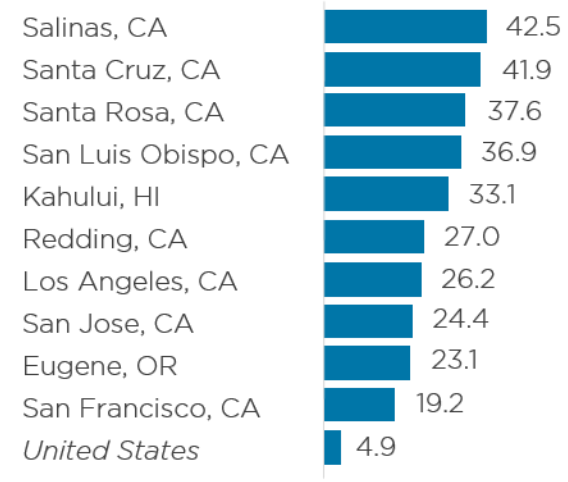
[3] Census regions.

Los Angeles and San Francisco metropolitan areas have as many unsheltered individuals as the other 27.

Despite the large size of unsheltered populations in large metropolitan areas, smaller metro areas, especially in western states and Florida, face rates of unsheltered individuals per general population[4] that can rival or exceed these major metro areas. For example, Los Angeles has fewer homeless individuals per 10,000 in the general population than smaller California metro areas such as Salinas, Santa Cruz, or Santa Rosa (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5

METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREAS WITH THE MOST UNSHELTERED INDIVIDUALS PER 10,000 GENERAL POPULATION, 2016

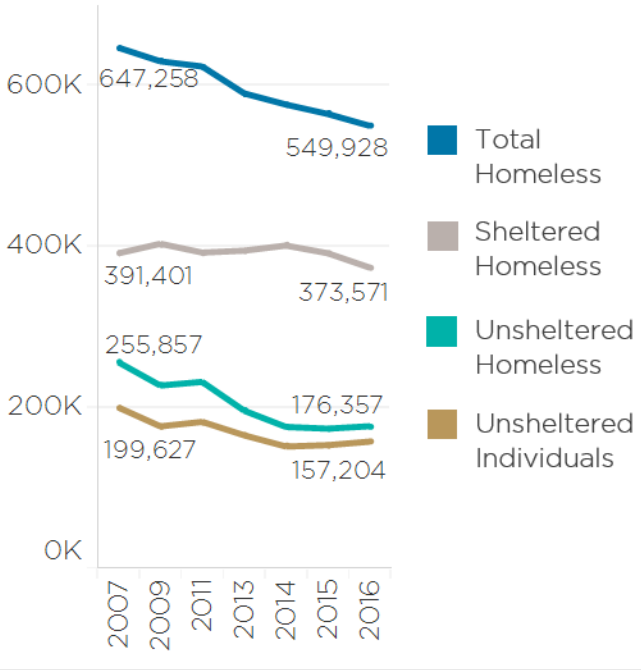


TRENDS IN UNSHELTERED HOMELESSNESS

In 2016, there were 79,500 fewer people unsheltered on a single night than in 2007, a decrease of 31 percent (see Figure 6). The number of unsheltered people in families decreased 66 percent and the number of unsheltered individuals decreased 21 percent. However, in 2016, unsheltered homelessness in the U.S. increased for the first time since 2010 (and only the second time since 2007). This was driven by an increase in unsheltered homelessness among individuals that began in 2014.

FIGURE 6

NATIONAL TRENDS, 2007 TO 2016



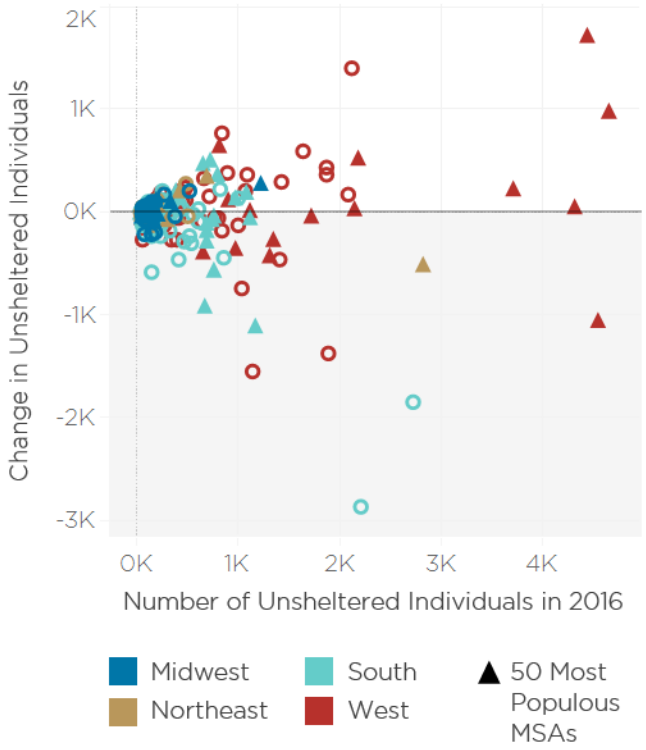
[4] Based on July 1, 2015 ACS population estimates (GCT-PEPANNRES, 2015 version). Proportion of CoC population is used to estimate unsheltered counts for counties partially within a CBSA. Rates are per 10,000 general population.

An examination of trends in point-in-time data reported by Continuums of Care (CoCs)[5] provides a more full understanding of this change in the national trend. Few jurisdictions have significant impact on the national trend, for two reasons. First, most CoCs report relatively small increases or decreases from year to year. For half of all CoCs (198 of 393),[6] the number of unsheltered individuals changed by fewer than 100 each year since 2007,[7] and almost one third of CoCs (118) never saw a change of more than 50 individuals. Second, few CoCs report a consistent trend, whether increasing or decreasing. Only one CoC reported a consistent increase (meaning an increase or no change) each year since 2007, and only three a consistent decrease. Over the past 5 years, 17 CoCs reported a consistent increase and 27 a consistent decrease. Only one-third of CoCs (128) saw a consistent trend in either direction for the past three years in a row.

As a result, the national trend (including the uptick in unsheltered individuals beginning in 2014) reflects a balance of incremental increases and decreases across the U.S. that has little to do with CoC region, population, or count size (see Figure 7). The trend is mostly driven by a few CoCs that count large numbers of unsheltered individuals and those that report consistent increases or decreases over time. The handful of CoCs reporting both high counts (more than 1,500 unsheltered individuals in 2016) and consistent increases for the past 5 years include: Los Angeles County, CA; San Francisco, CA; Seattle, WA; Alameda County, CA; and Monterey and San Benito Counties, CA. Large increases were also reported in more recent years in San Diego,

FIGURE 7

CHANGE IN THE NUMBER OF UNSHELTERED INDIVIDUALS BY COC, 2014 TO 2016 (Los Angeles County CoC excluded)



[5] Continuums of Care (CoCs) are entities that receive and coordinate homeless assistance funding and services in a defined geographic region. They can be an individual city or county, a combination of a group of counties, or an entire state. CoCs are the entity responsible for conducting point-in-time counts and reporting the estimates to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to be used to track national progress.

[6] For the purposes of this measure, only the 393 Continuums for which Point in Time Count data are available since 2007 have been included. Fulton and DeKalb Counties were combined with Atlanta, GA due to geographic changes. In 2016, there was a total of 402 CoCs.

[7] HUD mandates sheltered counts annually, but unsheltered counts are only mandated bi-annually. All CoCs submit odd year unsheltered counts, although 84 percent submitted new unsheltered counts in 2016. If no even year unsheltered count is conducted, HUD uses the prior year's count as the estimate.

CA; Phoenix, AZ; Anaheim, CA; and throughout Hawaii and Puerto Rico.

Apart from these few CoCs, unsheltered homelessness is generally decreasing in the U.S., as demonstrated by two examples. First, excluding the large increase reported in the Los Angeles County CoC, the national trend since 2014 would show a decrease of 6,163 unsheltered individuals rather than the increase seen. Second, fewer CoCs are reporting very high counts of unsheltered individuals (more than 3,000) than in prior years. In 2016, only six CoCs reported very high counts, fewer than any year since 2007 and down from the peak of 15 CoCs in 2012. Twelve CoCs that once reported more than 3,000 unsheltered individuals but that have since reported a decrease include: Anaheim, CA; Fresno, CA; Riverside, CA; Santa Rosa, CA; San Bernardino, CA; Tampa, FL; New Orleans, LA; Detroit, MI; New York City, NY; Houston, TX; and Texas and Georgia Balance of State CoCs.

What Influences High or Increasing Unsheltered Counts?

HOUSING MARKETS

Historically, homelessness has been found to correlate to low vacancies and high rents.[8] More recent studies found significant connections between rate of homelessness and housing market variables like median cost of rent, cost of rent for the lowest 10 percent of units, ratio of rent to income, and vacancy rate.[9] Studies, however, have rarely focused on connections to unsheltered homelessness in particular, but surveyed CoCs indicated their belief in this theory, citing the primary cause of increasing unsheltered counts to be increases in market rents and decreases in vacancy rates or availability of units.

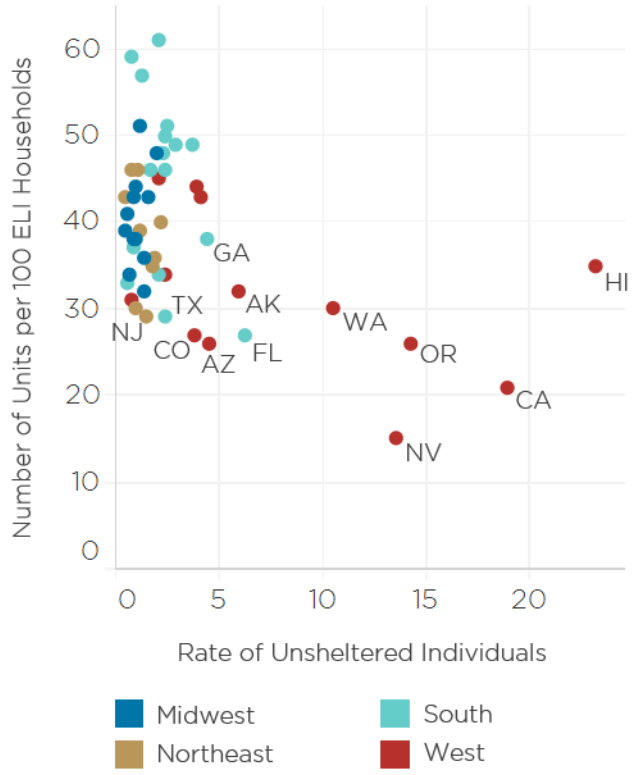
Several of the metro areas with high counts of unsheltered homelessness are amongst the highest-cost rental markets. San Francisco, San Jose, and Oakland CA have the three highest Fair Market Rents in the U.S.[10] and are jurisdictions with large unsheltered homelessness issues. San Francisco and San Jose reported more than 3,000 unsheltered individuals on a single night in 2016. And, San Francisco and Oakland are among the CoCs that have reported consistent increases for 5 years or more.

[8] Filer & Honig (1993).
[9] Quigley & Raphael (2001); Quigley, Raphael, & Smolensky (2001).
[10] 2017 Fair Market Rents for a one bedroom unit. HUD Metro FMR Areas sometimes differ in geographic boundary from CBSAs.

Another commonly used measure to evaluate housing affordability in a region is the number of available, affordable units for extremely low income (ELI) renters. An analysis of the number of units available to ELI renters[11] and the rate of unsheltered homelessness shows that states in the West and Florida, where unsheltered homelessness is most common, have among the lowest number of units available per 100 ELI renter households (see Figure 8). This is an important finding that indicates the significant role affordable housing plays in the dynamics of homelessness. It is, however, also important to note that the low availability of units is not proportional to the rate of unsheltered or overall homelessness, indicating the connection between market variables and unsheltered homelessness may be real but is only one piece in a larger puzzle.

FIGURE 8

AFFORDABLE UNITS AVAILABLE PER 100 ELI RENTER HOUSEHOLDS VS RATE OF UNSHELTERED INDIVIDUALS PER 10,000 GENERAL POPULATION



HOMELESS ASSISTANCE RESOURCES

Increasing rents and decreasing vacancies may lead to more people becoming homeless and make it more difficult for people to reaccess housing; however, it does not appear this alone is driving rates of unsheltered homelessness. A compounding factor could be a jurisdiction's ability to keep up the pace with temporary and permanent housing solutions.

Permanent Housing

The current primary response to homelessness in the U.S. is "permanent housing programs," namely permanent supportive housing (long-term rental assistance with supportive services) and rapid re-housing programs (housing search assistance, time-limited rent and case management assistance).

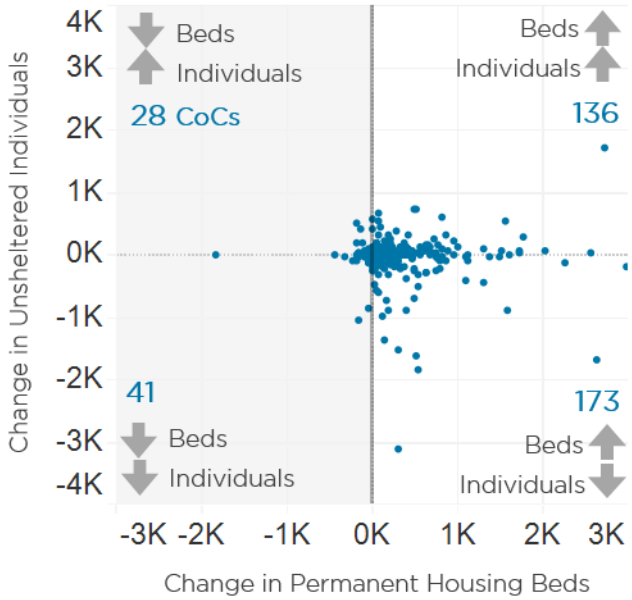
[11] Data on affordable units per extremely low-income households in 2015 are from the National Low-Income Housing Coalition.

People residing in these programs are no longer considered homeless. In addition to affordable housing concerns, surveyed CoCs identified a lack of these permanent housing resources, especially for individuals, as a driver of unsheltered homelessness.

Most CoCs[12] (313 of 395) increased the number of permanent housing beds since 2013. Most of these CoCs (173) saw a decrease in the number of unsheltered individuals during this time, but others (136) increased permanent housing and still saw unsheltered homelessness increase (see Figure 9). The magnitudes of shifts in permanent housing do not consistently correlate with changes in unsheltered individuals. This indicates that it is likely that permanent housing alone is not sufficient to address unsheltered homelessness among individuals and that some attention must be paid to the level of temporary housing available for this population.

FIGURE 9

CHANGE IN NUMBER OF PERMANENT HOUSING BEDS VS CHANGE IN NUMBER UNSHELTERED INDIVIDUALS, BY COC, 2013 TO 2016



17 of 395 CoCs had no change for one or both measures and do not fall into a quadrant.

Emergency Shelter and Other Temporary Housing

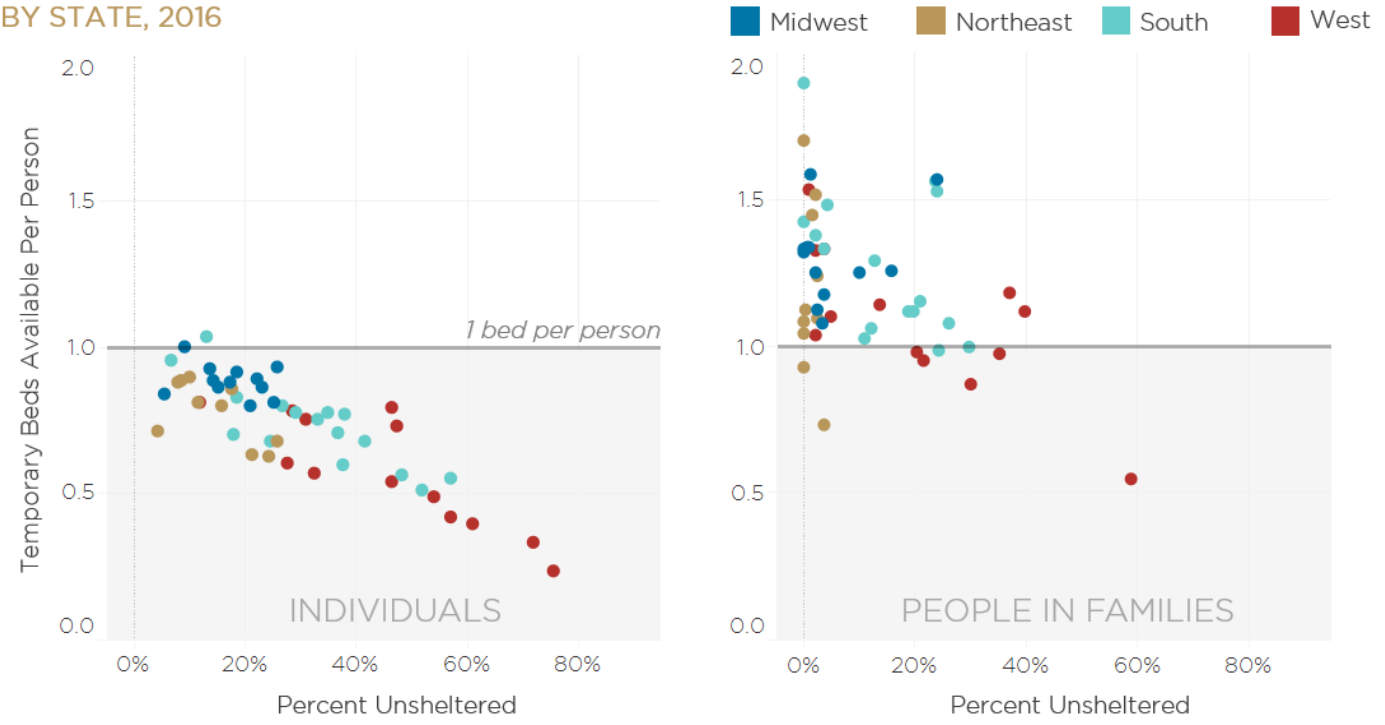
Temporary housing provided by the homeless assistance system in a jurisdiction consists of emergency shelter, transitional housing or safe haven programs. People residing in these programs are considered sheltered and most surveyed CoCs also indicated that a lack of emergency shelter capacity, especially for individuals, is a contributing factor to being unsheltered, even if extra winter shelter is available.

It is certainly true that the country as a whole does not have the capacity to provide temporary shelter to all people experiencing homelessness on a given night. As of 2016, only three year-round temporary beds exist for every four people experiencing homelessness in the U.S., but the shortfalls are imbalanced, varying by geographic region and population served. States in the west have the largest shelter shortfalls, particularly for individuals. Almost no state has enough temporary beds for

[12] For the purposes of this measure, only the 395 Continuums for which Point in Time Count and Housing Inventory Count data are available since 2013 have been included. Fulton and DeKalb Counties were again combined with Atlanta, GA due to geographic changes.

FIGURE 10

YEAR-ROUND TEMPORARY BEDS BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE VS PERCENT UNSHELTERED, BY STATE, 2016

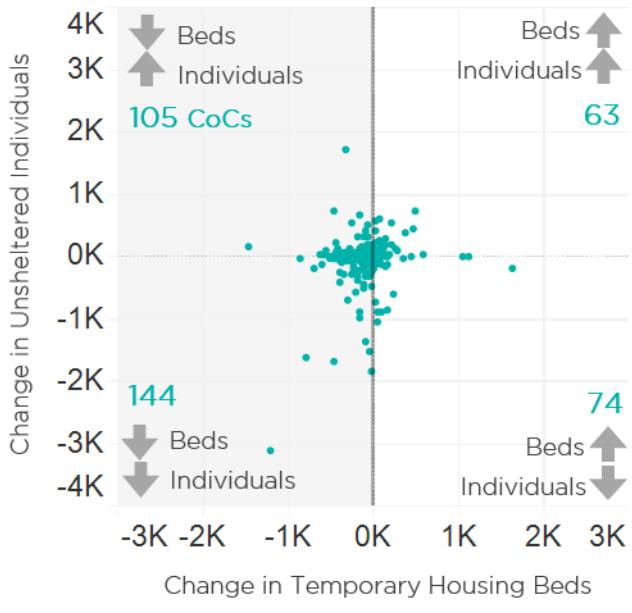


individuals. Individuals are 65 percent of people experiencing homelessness but only 49 percent of temporary beds are designated for individuals. Meanwhile, most states report a surplus of temporary beds for families (see Figure 10).

These imbalances suggest communities could invest more in temporary housing for individuals or realign their temporary housing to more proportionately serve individuals. But will investing in more temporary housing result in less unsheltered individuals? Not necessarily. Trends in unsheltered individuals do not point to a clear answer here. Between 2013 and 2016, most CoCs (144 of 220) that reported decreases in unsheltered homelessness also reported decreases in temporary housing capacity (see Figure 11), and even in some

FIGURE 11

CHANGE IN NUMBER OF TEMPORARY HOUSING BEDS VS CHANGE IN NUMBER UNSHELTERED INDIVIDUALS, BY COC, 2013 TO 2016



9 of 395 CoCs had no change for one or both measures and do not fall into a quadrant.

CoCs (63 of 140) that increased temporary housing capacity, the number of unsheltered individuals increased as well. This indicates that, while some jurisdictions likely do have a gap in temporary housing capacity, building additional temporary housing alone will not address unsheltered homelessness.

BARRIERS TO ASSISTANCE OR PERSONAL CHOICE

Despite the role that the availability of assistance plays in the number of unsheltered individuals, even CoCs with almost enough year-round shelter beds have individuals, especially chronically homeless individuals, who are unsheltered. Why?

Barriers to Assistance

For others, sleeping on the streets may be preferable to undesirable shelter options. There is not extensive research on this topic, but a handful of qualitative studies, mostly from Europe and Australia, may provide some insights. A person may avoid shelter, even feel less vulnerable on the streets, after experiencing theft, assault, intimidation, substance use, lack of cleanliness, disease, or problematic behaviors of others while in shelter.[13] Noise and anxiety in shelter environments, as well as early wake-up hours, can impede sleep.[14]

COC IDENTIFIED COMMON BARRIERS TO SHELTER (n = 45)

- No pets allowed (34)
- First-come first-served (33)
- Time limit (26)
- Not open 24 hours (25)
- Single gender only (20)
- Requires job search (16)
- Requires sobriety (14)
- Requires faith-based activities (11)

Additionally, research suggests that programs may have policies that may make entering shelter less desirable than remaining outside. These policies include not allowing access for couples, those facing challenges with substance use or mental health, or pets.[15] And, some people experiencing unsheltered homelessness have been rejected from services due to behavioral problems or substance use.[16]

These barriers to shelter use are relevant to CoCs with high or increasing unsheltered populations. According to data reported by CoCs as part of the point-in-time count, substance use disorders and

[13] Fitzpatrick & Kennedy (2001); Mayock & Corr (2013); Nettleton, Neale & Stevenson (2011); Parsell & Parsell (2012); Ravenhill (2008).
[14] Nettleton, Neale & Stevenson (2011).
[15] Fitzpatrick & Kennedy (2001).
[16] Fitzpatrick & Kennedy (2001); Ravenhill (2008).

severe mental illness are both more common in the unsheltered population and surveyed CoCs identified substance use as a primary concern in the unsheltered population. Additionally, the majority of shelters in many surveyed CoCs do not allow pets, are for one gender only, impose time limits, or have other barriers.

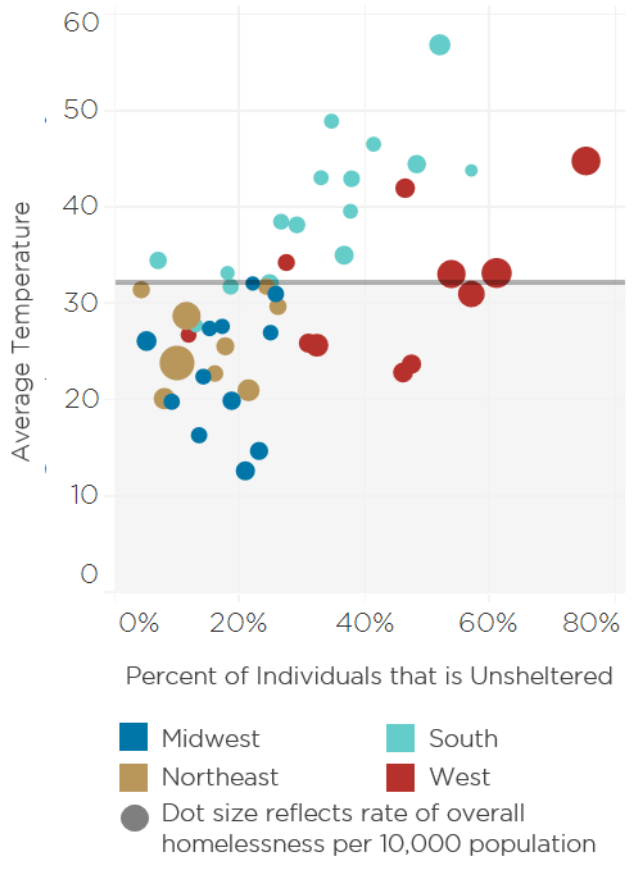
Addressing these barriers to programs is important for efforts to decrease unsheltered homelessness, particularly in locations where temporary housing is not being fully utilized. Decreasing barriers to shelter can also help protect people and decrease criminal justice involvement. Most surveyed CoCs saw at least one case of reported violence in the unsheltered population in recent years, usually involving violence of one unsheltered person against another unsheltered person. And, in 21 of 45 surveyed CoCs, camping in public areas is illegal, and loitering or vagrancy is illegal in 20, meaning that barriers created by homeless programs may increase a person's likelihood of having criminal justice involvement.

Temperature

Temperature is a frequently cited possible reason for why a person may choose to sleep outside as opposed to enter a temporary housing program such as an emergency shelter. A few studies have explored a possible connection between temperature or winter weather and homelessness, but the findings vary in significance and rarely focus exclusively on unsheltered homelessness. Still, states with higher average temperatures in January 2016 generally reported a higher proportion of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness (see Figure 12). It is important to know that these results conflate with the availability of temporary housing as discussed above but also suggest there is a possibility that, when the temperature would not prohibit it, some people may prefer sleeping outside to entering an undesirable temporary housing program or one with high barriers to entry.

FIGURE 12

AVERAGE STATE TEMPERATURE VS PERCENT OF INDIVIDUALS UNSHELTERED, JANUARY 2016 (Alaska and Hawaii excluded)



Strategies for Consideration

Based on the above analyses, there are some strategies that should be considered to better address unsheltered homelessness on the national, state, and local levels.

- All levels of government from the federal government to state and local governments should invest more heavily in the development of affordable housing, with particular attention paid to the size of units (SROs, studios, and one-bedroom units being the most accessible for individuals) and to targeting the affordable housing that is developed to people whose income is at least below 30 percent of area median income.

- Invest in permanent housing solutions, including rapid re-housing and permanent supportive housing. As seen above, some communities saw unsheltered homelessness decrease even with reported losses in temporary crisis beds. Ensure that permanent housing programs allow entry directly from the streets.

- At a minimum, realign existing temporary housing resources to more proportionately serve unsheltered individuals and those experiencing chronic homelessness, particularly if a jurisdiction has empty family beds. Consider if there are low cost ways of creating more shelter opportunities for people by partnering with churches, making use of unused government buildings, and leveraging existing transitional housing facilities for short-term stays.

- Improve the operating policies at existing shelters and other temporary housing accommodations. These improvements could include lowering barriers to entry, remaining open 24 hours a day, providing a way to store belongings, and finding safe shelter for pets.

- Address substance use among the unsheltered population through outreach efforts which could include creating multi-disciplinary teams that can help people with substance use issues while outreach workers engage people in entering shelter and permanent housing programs.

- Explore ways to involve police in engagement rather than enforcement. Arrests may result where police lack better alternatives to help a person. Equip police to connect people with available resources like outreach workers and low barrier shelters.