



Solutions for Change

# Solve It! Resources

January 2017

## Good Money After Bad Data

### Data Drives Money

Every year, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides billions of dollars in funding to cities and counties to assist in efforts to house the homeless. This year, HUD announced \$1.95 billion for local efforts. San Diego received \$18.2 million to continue its efforts in the city and county.

HUD gauges its success on the annual Point In Time Count, which enlists volunteers and community organizations to physically count the homeless on a single night in January all across the county. Based on this count, HUD estimates 550,000 people were homeless on a single night in 2016.

Since 2010, communities reported a decrease of 14 percent of the total number of individuals counted that were experiencing homelessness. In addition, counted homeless veterans fell by 47 percent, counted chronic homeless declined 27 percent and counted homeless families declined by nearly 23 percent. Based on these data, the number of persons sleeping on the streets decreased by 32 percent since 2007.

It sounds like great news that billions of taxpayer dollars are making an impact on this complex and heart-wrenching problem. Unfortunately, however, miscounting the homeless plays a major role in the reported decline of homelessness. In fact, the overall reduction in homelessness in recent years relies completely on street counts not on the effectiveness of HUD policies and programs.

### Summary

HUD's Point In Time count estimated that 550,000 people were homeless on a single night in 2016.

Since 2010, PIT counts have shown a decrease of 32 % in the number of street-homeless.

The overall reduction in homelessness is completely attributed to street counts, not on the effectiveness of HUD programs.

The PIT count is fraught with errors and irregular counting methods.

The PIT count is biased towards certain types of populations, such as chronic street homeless, and against other populations, such as families.

While counts have shown a decrease in homelessness, the demand for shelter beds remains steady.

## Counting Isn't Easy

While it may seem relatively easy to count people living on the street, it's actually a very difficult task fraught with the possibility of errors. These errors can be compounded because counts are carried out by volunteers with little training.

For one thing, no one methodology of counting is uniformly employed across the country. Instead, communities form their own methodologies for conducting counts. For example, the state of Utah reported a 91 percent reduction in homelessness from 2005 – 2015. An examination of the math showed that Utah was inconsistent in counting its homeless and changed its definition of who was chronically homeless in different years.

Another challenge to accurate counts is that annual count nights are publicly announced ahead of time, giving distrustful homeless individuals the opportunity to remain hidden. This significantly impacts one homeless population - homeless families. Homeless parents are often concerned that if their homelessness is found out, their children could be removed and placed into foster care.

A number of practical reasons cast further doubt on the accuracy of homeless counts. First, if street homelessness is declining at the rate many communities report, such as over 50 percent, then these same communities should report a decrease in demand for shelter beds. However, many of them report an increased need for shelter beds. Nationally, the number of people (in both families and for individuals) in shelters has remained steady.

**Bad data has solidified support for the current top-down, one-size-fits-all approach and directs public money to serving the homeless in ways that keep many unnecessarily out in the cold**

Counts are not always measured in the context of other circumstances. The 47% decrease in Los Angeles between 2007 and 2009, for instance, came in the midst of a major crackdown on low-level offenses on Skid Row causing homeless individuals to find shelter elsewhere.

## The Danger of Bad Data

The danger of bad data is the appearance of success where none exists. Current policies and programs encouraged and funded by HUD are thought to be successful in reducing the number of people living on the streets or other unsuitable circumstances because of weak and often unreliable counts.

In some communities and among some homeless populations, the current approach could very well be effective. But for other populations, such as homeless families that have been woefully undercounted, other approaches and programs could not only help but lead to economic independence for the once homeless.

HUD experts are convinced that its approach has led to reductions in homelessness. It's tragic that bad data has solidified support for a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach and directs good money to serving the homeless in ways that keep many unnecessarily out in the cold.