GAO Highlights
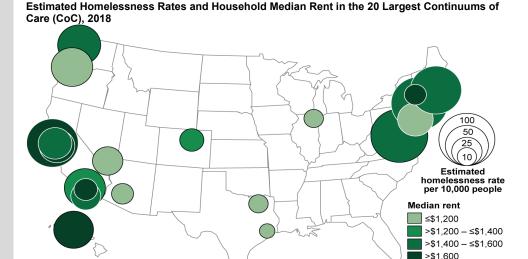
HOMELESSNESS

Better HUD Oversight of Data Collection Could Improve Estimates of Homeless Population

Why GAO Did This Study

Policymakers have raised concerns about the extent to which recent increases in homelessness are associated with the availability of affordable housing. Moreover, counting the homeless population is a longstanding challenge. GAO was asked to review the current state of homelessness in the United States. This report examines (1) efforts to measure homelessness and HUD's oversight of these efforts and (2) factors associated with recent changes in homelessness.

GAO analyzed three HUD data sources on homelessness and developed an econometric model of the factors influencing changes in homelessness. GAO also conducted structured interviews with 12 researchers and representatives of 21 CoCs and four focus groups with a total of 34 CoC representatives responsible for collecting and maintaining homelessness data. CoCs were selected for interviews and focus groups to achieve diversity in size and geography. GAO also visited three major cities that experienced recent increases in homelessness.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that HUD (1) conduct quality checks on CoCs' data-collection methodologies, (2) improve its instructions for using probability sampling techniques to estimate homelessness, and (3) assess and enhance the assistance it provides to CoCs on data collection. HUD concurred with the recommendations.

What GAO Found

Data collected through the Point-in-Time (PIT) count—a count of people experiencing homelessness on a single night—have limitations for measuring homelessness. The PIT count is conducted each January by Continuums of Care (CoC)—local homelessness planning bodies that apply for grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and coordinate homelessness services. The 2019 PIT count estimated that nearly 568,000 people (0.2 percent of the U.S. population) were homeless, a decline from the 2012 count of about 621,500 but a slight increase over the period's low of about 550,000 in 2016. While HUD has taken steps to improve data quality, the data likely underestimate the size of the homeless population because identifying people experiencing homelessness is inherently difficult. Some CoCs' total and unsheltered PIT counts have large year-over-year fluctuations, which raise questions about data accuracy. GAO found that HUD does not closely examine CoCs' methodologies for collecting data to ensure they meet HUD's standards. HUD's instructions to CoCs on probability sampling techniques to estimate homelessness were incomplete. Some CoC representatives also said that the assistance HUD provides on data collection does not always meet their needs. By strengthening its oversight and guidance in these areas, HUD could further improve the quality of homelessness data.

To understand factors associated with homelessness in recent years, GAO used PIT count data to conduct an econometric analysis, which found that rental prices were associated with homelessness. To mitigate data limitations, GAO used data from years with improved data quality and took other analytical steps to increase confidence in the results. CoC representatives GAO interviewed also identified rental prices and other factors such as job loss as contributing to homelessness.

Estimated Homelessness Rates and Household Median Rent in the 20 Largest Continuums of Care (CoC), 2018

Estimated homelessness rate per 10,000 people

100
50
25
10

Median rent
≤$1,200
>$1,200 – ≤$1,400
>$1,400 – ≤$1,600
>$1,600

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Housing and Urban Development and U.S. Census Bureau data. | GAO-20-433

Note: This map shows the 20 largest Point-in-Time counts by CoC in 2018. GAO estimated 2018 homelessness rates because the U.S. Census Bureau data used to calculate these rates were available up to 2018 at the time of analysis. GAO used 2017 median rents (in 2018 dollars) across all unit sizes and types.

United States Government Accountability Office