2023 Point in Time Recommendations Report

Count of People Experiencing Homelessness in Clackamas, Multnomah, and Washington Counties, Oregon

This report was prepared for

Clackamas County, Multnomah County and the City of Portland Joint Office of Homeless Services, and Washington County

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Introduction

The 2023 Tri-County Point-in-Time (PIT) Count provided a snapshot of people who were experiencing homelessness on the night of **Tuesday, January 24, 2023**, in Clackamas, Multnomah, and Washington Counties within Oregon. This was the first tri-county region PIT Count conducted and was the result of collaborative efforts between all three counties.

This report is a reflection of thoughts of the Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative (HRAC) at Portland State University (PSU) on recommendations for future tri-county region PIT Counts. Overall, we believe the 2023 PIT Count went well and we appreciated the co-learning opportunity while working alongside our local government partners.

Recommendations

PIT Count Purpose

The PIT Count fulfills a Housing and Urban Development (HUD) federal requirement. The PIT Count, particularly the street survey, can also be used as a way to collect additional information about people experiencing homelessness. In 2023, the PIT Count was used for both of these purposes.

At this juncture, the tri-county region should consider whether the PIT Count is a useful place to invest more resources and, if so, conduct the PIT Count more robustly. Conversely, the Counties may determine to invest fewer resources in the PIT and, as a result, focus just on fulfilling the HUD requirements for the Count.

A more robust treatment of the PIT Count could include conducting interviews with people, using respondent driven sampling, creating survey sites with services for people, and other ways to expand the use of the tool. Questions could be added to the survey.

A central framing question for discussions about how to consider future PIT Counts could be: *Do the counties want a PIT Count designed to fulfill HUD's requirement or to capture an expanded portrait of people experiencing homelessness?*

Frequency

The street count component of the PIT is a massive undertaking. HRAC's recommendation is not to conduct the street county every year and to instead conduct the street count every other year. There are additional data sets coming online, like Built for Zero (BfZ), that provide updated data for a portion of the people counted in the street count.

Understanding PIT data requires additional context that is difficult to generate and weave alongside the data in a year. Additional time between street counts will allow for better analysis of additional sampling techniques and the possibility of building on existing data sets.

Additional Data Sources

There are multiple data sources that can inform the PIT Count. However, we urge caution in using them. No data set is ideal. The simplest, and cleanest, PIT Count is one that includes the fewest number of data sets. That said, we also understand the rationale for using additional data sets.

We remain concerned about the use of Multnomah County's coordinated entry data as part of the PIT data. Should Multnomah County continue to utilize coordinated entry data, we encourage the county to more closely evaluate which records from Coordinated Entry should be added to the PIT data set.

The number of records we received in 2023 with little to no data are especially concerning because HUD requires 100% reporting and incomplete records could substantially shift the way that subpopulation numbers are projected. In addition, this data set required significant hours of cleaning and restructuring. If Multnomah County wishes to include this data in the future, we recommend that the data be pulled the day after the count is concluded, to better ensure data quality control when meeting the HUD reporting deadline.

Built for Zero (BfZ) data offers an additional data set, that should be similar countywide, that can be considered to inform the PIT Count. Counties should keep in mind that this data set is restricted to a particular population, based on a specific set of criteria, that is more restrictive than the HUD definition for homelessness. Relying too much on the BfZ data set will skew PIT Count results in directions driven by that population. BfZ may be helpful in developing a sampling methodology, especially if the data are geocoded.

Sub-population Specific Questions

We recommend continued analysis and consideration around PIT questions related to experiences of domestic violence and LGBTQI identities. Continued analysis can help determine pros, cons, and concerns about asking questions related to domestic violence. And, as this was the first year where LGBTQI identities were available as selections, we recommend additional consideration of how to effectively build these questions in and analyze around them.

Use of a Third-Party App for Data Collection

Using an app shows significant promise for PIT Count coordination, execution, and data collection. We believe that the right app would support a more streamlined and efficient PIT. However, results on the actual use of the app selected in 2023 were mixed and feedback was largely connected to the type of user (PSU, outreach workers, community volunteer, etc.) and their needs within the PIT Count. Here, we describe our experiences with Counting Us and highlight some key considerations for the future use of the app.

Counting Us

We remain conflicted on whether the Counting Us app is the best app to achieve the desired outcomes for Clackamas, Multnomah, and Washington Counties.

Counting Us was designed for a one-night street count that would be largely executed by community volunteers. This meant that the way we used their "teams" feature was not true to their intention and while we were able to work on a workaround in 2023, it is not clear that the same workaround would be available in the future.

There was significant backend work required to make the app useful for this coordinated tri-county regional effort, as any deviation from standard HUD protocol created issues within the app. We do want to acknowledge that the Counting Us support team that we worked with – TJ Swanson and Kevin Charoenworawat -- were amazing partners in this work and that we are very grateful for their responsiveness in the days leading up to and during the count.

Additionally, the contract with Counting Us for the street count indicated that data collected through the app can be shared, so it is likely of interest to the counties to confirm and validate whether that is a desired use of their data going forward.

If Counting Us is chosen for use in a subsequent PIT Count, decisions around the use of matching datasets, coordinated entry data, and the use of custom questions and options should be made earlier.

Deciding whether Counting Us is the right app for the tri-county region will depend, to some degree, on the purpose(s) determined for future PIT Counts. The less customization the counties want, and the fewer matched data sets that will be in play, the greater argument there is for maintaining an investment in this specific software application.

Geotagging

One the most helpful parts of the app was the geotagging of surveys as they were completed in real time. This allowed the PIT team to debrief daily with outreach workers to determine whether specific places were being canvassed effectively. The geotagging feature in the app also currently offers the ability to sample based on geography and demography simultaneously. Washington County will have sufficient data to accomplish this on the next count. Going forward, this geotagging also could allow for the counties to analyze general trends for people experiencing homelessness within particular encampments, in order to better deploy services.

There were a few issues with Counting Us' geocoding that resulted in people being geocoded to other countries or otherwise clearly inaccurate locations within the region. Overall, though, we found the app delivered on the geotagging feature as promised.

Data Entry

Having the data "pre-entered" into the app (when it was collected in the app), and not needing to manually enter it after the data collection time period was complete, was helpful.

Theoretically, it would be helpful to have all the data in one place - but that was not how the app organized data for the tri-county region in 2023. It also would have been helpful to have volunteer / user registration linked to the data that was collected in a more robust way, as well as the ability to tag and filter by organization, to see which organizations turned in surveys in specific locations. This year this was only possible, to some degree, with manual manipulation of the data from the app.

Automatic Reporting

The automatic reporting that the app offered was a benefit, but in 2023, that feature came at the expense of the use of custom questions. For example, using LGBTQI options (and the ability to select multiple options) was a customization that removed the ability to run automatic HUD reporting tables within the app.

Additionally, the way Counting Us set up the data and questionnaires with the intention of data being reported using their automation meant that certain fields were populated based on rules that were not clear and did not necessarily become clearer when looking at the raw data.

Our experience indicated that there was some apparent sloppiness in the backend of the Counting Us app – including, for example, that volunteer information was stored as a survey within the same data set as the collected data.

Consent Question

The Counting Us app did not contain a consent question at the start of the survey and it was not possible to add one. This led to a continued difficulty of easily tracking refusal rates, refusal locations, and refusal reasons in real-time. We find it concerning that a survey company did not automatically include a consent to participate question.

Surveyor Perspectives

In general, if someone thought the app worked well, they really leaned into using and learning the tool. If a user was wary of the app, they tended not to use it. Earlier introduction of the app within the PIT timeline may increase comfort with using it in future years. Until usership is strong, future PIT Counts should plan to have paper surveys and online resources available. Outreach workers who were comfortable with the app felt that it was significantly better than paper surveys; however, not all outreach workers wanted to use the app. At times, this reluctance to use the app was connected to the difficulty of downloading and installing the app on a company- or organization-provided device.

Capacity Building

The capacity that was built this year should help expedite future decision making and improve coherent tracking of definitions. This includes standardization across the counties in terms of expectations for distinct portions of the PIT Count.

In the future, to account for unreliability of lay volunteers, many more people need to be assigned to various locations with greater frequency – the same area may need to be canvassed multiple times, with the resulting data combed through to remove duplicates.

Elected Officials Participation

Leading up to and during the week of the PIT, the HRAC team received requests from elected officials from the counties and the City of Portland to be given special treatment in terms of training and participation in the street count as an enumerator.

If elected official participation continues, it needs to be addressed by the continuums and counties and offered consistently. We wish to remind everyone that this is fundamentally a data collection opportunity, not an opportunity to get to know constituents or demonstrate commitment to an issue.

Outreach Worker Investment and Inclusion

Outreach workers were instrumental in administering the count. Leading up to the count we met with outreach worker groups frequently, and during the count we met with them daily. We also attended winter emergency meetings during the count to make adjustments to PIT Count plans as needed.

Outreach workers expressed interest in being more engaged in the count and its logistics earlier in the process in future years. This will be especially important going forward given the daytime, and possible nighttime, camping bans in the City of Portland. We also recommend adding additional outreach worker-specific PIT Count planning meetings to the PIT timeline, rather than simply joining existing or standing meetings.

Reporting and Data

This year we produced a long, table-filled report. Its production was onerous and required a significant number of resources. We are not sure that this is the best use of resources, and we recommend that the counties determine the purpose of an overall summary and findings report. Some considerations in this decision include:

- Who the user is of PIT data, and what is their level of data proficiency and technology?

- How often do counties (and PSU) receive specific data asks that are not in the report or are otherwise not available online?

- What are the equity impacts of a shorter report that does not dis-aggregate data extensively?

- What are the priority tables for the report?

Doubled Up / School District Data

Going forward, we recommend that the counties determine a clear statement of intention of how data collected from school districts, for the doubled-up count, will be used. We received a variety of questions from school districts about the use of this data, both out of privacy and suitability concerns, as well as functional concerns around what data they should pull and provide.

Providing additional context and coordinating with the school districts earlier on in the PIT Count process will likely lead to greater participation across the counties. We did not contact them with a sufficient lead up time to the count.

Conclusion

PSU-HRAC thoroughly appreciated, and enjoyed, the opportunity to work on the 2023 PIT count. Being part of the first tri-county count was especially rewarding. We hope that the information presented here helps inform future counts.