Who is Homeless in Wisconsin? A Look at Statewide Data

Homelessness in Wisconsin is not just an urban problem—well over half of people who used services or shelter last year were outside of Dane and Milwaukee counties. Nor is it a problem just for individuals. About half of people experiencing homelessness are members of families with minor children. This brief summarizes what homelessness looks like in Wisconsin and the policy implications.

How are homeless people counted?

There are two primary ways to count people experiencing homelessness. One method is the *Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)*, a statewide database that generates unduplicated, real-time numbers regarding shelter and service use over the course of a year. It is used by the majority of homeless shelters and service providers in the state, but does not count people in domestic violence shelters or those living on the streets who do not use shelters or services.

The second is the *Point-in-Time* (PIT) count that is conducted on one night in January each year. This more comprehensive count captures not only those counted in the HMIS, but also people in domestic violence shelters, living on the streets, or who use shelters and services that do not participate in the HMIS. Its limitation is that it serves as a one-day snapshot of homelessness in Wisconsin.

How many people were served by Wisconsin's HMIS providers and what were their characteristics?

Using HMIS data, 22,050 people used homeless shelters or services in Wisconsin in federal fiscal year 2016. Of those people served:

- 46% were in families with minor children;
- 58% lived outside of Dane and Milwaukee counties;
- 9% were military veterans; and
- 2% were runaway youth under the age of 18.

The vast majority (88%) of people experiencing homelessness used an emergency shelter. The number of emergency shelters has grown in the past few years, and they are appearing for the first time in places like Eagle River, Shawano, and Waupaca. If a county does not have a shelter program, people needing assistance tend to travel to the closest community that does have one.
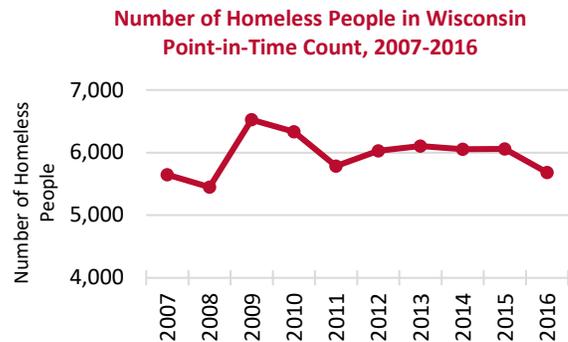
How many people were homeless on one night in January 2016 and what were their characteristics?

In the January 2016 PIT count, 5,685 people were counted as homeless. Of those people:

- 22% had a severe mental illness;
- 22% were victims of domestic violence;
- 15% had chronic substance abuse;
- 6% were chronically homeless; and
- 188 youth under age 25 were parents.

The figure shows the number of people experiencing homelessness over time in Wisconsin.

Number of Homeless People in Wisconsin Point-in-Time Count, 2007-2016

What are Continuums of Care (CoC)?

Continuums of Care (CoC) are local or regional planning bodies comprising shelters, service providers, and other stakeholders that apply for federal funding and coordinate housing and services with the goal of ending homelessness. Wisconsin has four CoCs: Milwaukee City/County, Dane County/City of Madison, Racine City/County, and Balance of State (69 remaining counties).

What are the policy implications of recent changes?

As in other states, Wisconsin's CoCs are replacing transitional housing programs (considered temporary) with rapid re-housing programs (considered permanent housing and not included in PIT counts), to align with what research says is more effective for alleviating homelessness. CoCs also are implementing a coordinated entry system to better match people with appropriate services and shelter, and divert some from entering the shelter system altogether.

As these changes are implemented, the official number of people experiencing homelessness may fluctuate from year to year, possibly showing decreases that might not reflect an actual drop in the number of people needing services and shelter. In 2016, the number of people using emergency shelters in the Balance of State CoC was the highest ever, at 1,939, up from 1,920 the year before. Yet the PIT count for this CoC decreased from 3,597 in 2015 to 3,445 in 2016. During this transition time and in the context of federal and state goals to end homelessness, Wisconsin policymakers have an opportunity to ensure homeless families and individuals have access to evidence-based services and shelter. ●

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