2008 Homeless Count Shows Need for Programs in Indianapolis

In January 2008, a team coordinated by Indiana University's Center for Health Policy conducted the annual point-in-time count of homeless individuals throughout Marion County. This issue brief discusses the details and background of the count as well as findings and thoughts for policymakers concerned with improving services for the Indianapolis community's homeless population.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides federal funds and resources for programs to aid the homeless. Any county that applies for federal funds for the homeless in their community is required by HUD to complete a countywide count of homeless individuals every other year and a housing inventory annually. In addition to the count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals, the Center for Health Policy also completed the annual housing inventory, an inventory of beds for homeless individuals, including year-round, seasonal, and overflow beds in emergency shelters, domestic violence shelters, and transitional housing programs.

The homeless count is used to estimate the scope of homelessness in the community. Combined with the housing inventory data, this information can be used to provide elected officials with information on homeless services, identify existing gaps in service, and make informed funding decisions. Locally, it is used for planning and program development, the Continuum of Care Application for McKinney-Vento funds, and raising public awareness and community involvement.

HUD has numerous requirements that must be followed when conducting a homeless count. The

count must be conducted every other year, but annual counts are highly encouraged. The count must also occur on one day during the last ten days of January. This set timeframe promotes consistency in the data that HUD collects from across the nation, and is also typically a time when shelters are at capacity due to cold weather.

The count requires both sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals to be counted. For sheltered homeless, all adults, children, and unaccompanied youth residing in emergency shelters and transitional housing, including domestic violence shelters, and residential programs for runaway/homeless youth must be counted. For unsheltered homeless, all adults, children, and unaccompanied youth sleeping in places not meant for human habitation must be counted. Information on the number of sheltered individuals who are chronically homeless, seriously mentally ill, chronic substance abusers, veterans, persons with HIV/AIDS, victims of domestic violence, and unaccompanied youth must also be collected for both sheltered and unsheltered homeless.

We estimate that between 4,500 and 7,500 individuals in Marion County experience homelessness during the course of the year.

On January 24, 2008, the annual point-in-time homeless count was undertaken in Marion County. This is the second year that the Center for Health Policy has coordinated the collection and analysis of the data. Formerly, the counts were administered by the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention (CHIP), and CHIP remains a key contributor to the success of the count. As was the case in 2007, our goal was to provide an accurate count of the homeless because important policy decisions are dependent on the data collected.

Methodology

Planning for the homeless count began in fall 2007. We contacted emergency shelters and transitional housing programs in Marion County to provide them with information about the count and what was needed of them. In December, we met with representatives from these facilities and programs to inform them of the purpose of the count, familiarize them with the forms that would be used and the information we needed to gather, and obtain information from each program regarding the need for survey assistants on the night of the count. The December meeting provided these agencies with information that fostered greater participation in the count.

In addition to meetings with local homeless agencies, we held focus groups with outreach workers who consistently work and interact with homeless individuals on the street. These focus groups identified areas in Marion County with known populations of homeless individuals. These areas were then mapped so they could be covered during the street count. In an effort to provide a more accurate count of homeless youth, we worked with Outreach, Inc., an organization that helps homeless youth in the Indianapolis area.

As was the case with the 2007 homeless count, count coordinators did not actively recruit lay volunteers for the night of the count. The shelter count (of individuals at emergency shelters and transitional housing programs) was conducted by employees of the facility or by a survey assistant, an IUPUI student in a class concerning the homeless. The street count was carried out by a number of teams pre-assigned to different areas of the county. Typically, each team consisted of one IUPUI student and three or four outreach workers. The job of the student in either case was to act as a recorder, filling out a survey on each homeless individual encountered. Additionally, teams of IUPUI nursing students were sent to local emergency rooms, and other teams were sent to public places such as libraries to search for homeless individuals and complete surveys.

The surveys, developed by CHP with input from the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention, outreach workers, and students, were slightly modified from last year to improve clarity and flow. The information collected was the same: location, age, gender, race, length of homelessness, number of episodes of homelessness, veteran status, disability status, substance abuse status, employment/school status, domestic violence status, if part of a homeless family, and HIV/AIDS status. Homeless persons found on the street were interviewed, whereas those in shelters or transitional housing programs had an option to complete the form themselves or be interviewed.

Findings

HUD considers a person to be homeless if he or she meets one of two different classifications: 1) resides in a place not meant for human habitation, such as a car, park, sidewalk, abandoned building, or on the street (unsheltered homeless person); or 2) resides in an emergency shelter or transitional housing for homeless persons who originally came from the streets or emergency shelters (sheltered homeless). Note that those known to be homeless counted in motels meet HUD's definition of homelessness only if they were using a voucher. And those who are "doubled-up" (living with friends or extended family on a temporary basis) do not meet HUD's definition.

Using the HUD definition, 1,524 homeless persons were counted in Marion County on the night of January 24, 2008. Table 1 shows a comparison of the 2008 count numbers and the 2007 numbers for sheltered and unsheltered homeless, while those in specific homeless subpopulations are shown in Table 2 on page 4.

The last column of Table 2 shows the estimates of the subpopulations based on federal data, which seem to indicate that there may have been underreporting of some subpopulations in the count (chronically homeless, severely mentally ill, and HIV/AIDS). Since these subpopulations were identified by self-reporting, it is not surprising that there may be underreporting. Indianapolis seems to have a higher proportion of homeless with substance abuse problems and who are victims of domestic violence or veterans than the national averages.

Table 1: Sheltered and Unsheltered Homeless Individuals Counted in Annual Homeless Counts, Marion County, Indiana, 2007 and 2008

	2007	2008	Percent Change
Low temperature	19° F	3° F	
Persons in emergency shelters	691	758	+10%
Persons in transitional housing	943	633	-33%
Persons unsheltered/ "street"	234	133	-43%
Total	1,868	1,524	-18%

The decrease in total homeless shown in Table 1 could be due to several reasons. First, the weather on the night of the count was very cold on January 24, 2008. The mean temperature that day was 15 ° F with a low of 3 ° F, not considering wind chill. While cold temperatures may bring more homeless to emergency shelters, others who would typically be on the street may seek refuge in more hidden places such as abandoned buildings or in homes of friends or family. Also, some transitional housing programs in Marion County have closed or no longer serve the homeless. In 2007, those programs accounted for 216 of the homeless individuals in transitional housing programs.

Another factor is the nature of point-in-time counts. A point-in-time count attempts to count, in a few hours, a population that is by nature constantly changing and difficult to find. If we had counted again a week later, we might have had different results.
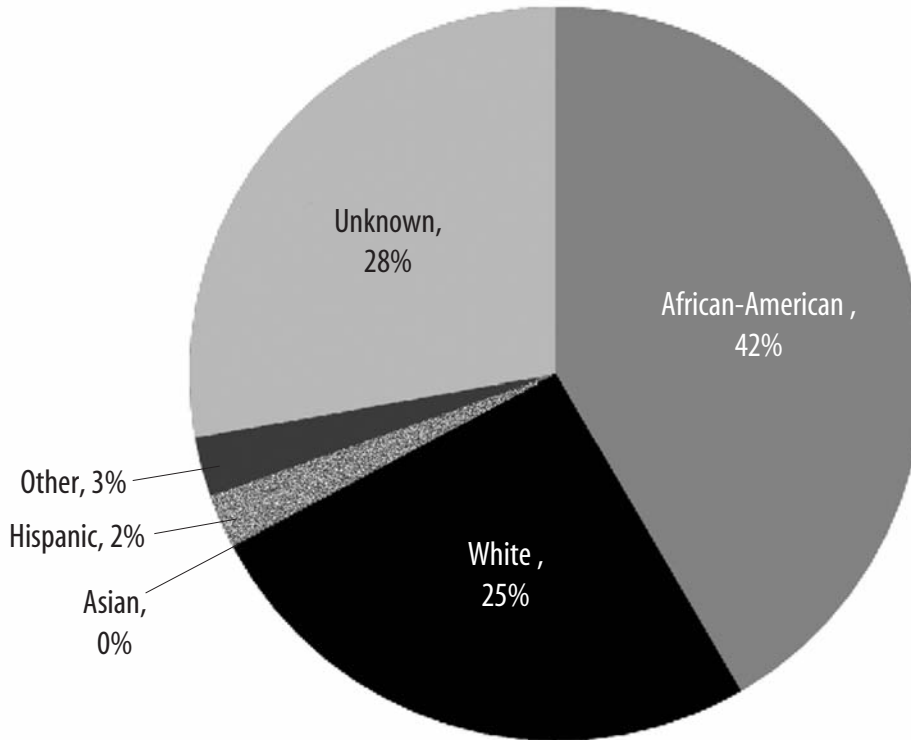
Table 2: Homeless Count Results by Subpopulations, Indianapolis, 2008

Homeless Subpopulation	Persons in Emergency Shelters	Persons in Transitional Shelters	Total Sheltered Counted	Estimated Number Based on Federal Percent of Homeless Population Sheltered	Unsheltered Homeless Counted	Estimated Number Based on Federal Percent of Homeless Population Unsheltered	Total Sheltered and Unsheltered Counted	Estimated Total Based on Federal Percentages
Chronically homeless*	87	N/A	87	142	34	202	121	334
Severely mentally ill	10	16	26	162	6	104	32	266
Persons with chronic substance abuse problems	164	227	391	217	39	144	430	361
Veterans	79	134	213	90	17	54	230	144
Persons with HIV/AIDS	6	3	9	33	1	11	10	44
Victims of domestic violence	177	142	319	111	17	45	336	156

*Chronic homelessness is defined as the following: an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has either been continuously homeless for a year or more or has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. To be considered chronically homeless, persons must have been sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g., living on the streets) and/or in emergency shelter during that time.

Because this was a point-in-time count and we want to know the number of individuals who experience homelessness during the course of the year, based on national research, CHP estimates that the number of people who experience homelessness at some point during the year is three to five times the number counted on January 24, 2008. Using this formula, we estimate that between 4,500 and 7,500 individuals in Marion County experience homelessness during the year. This estimate is confirmed by data from Connect2Help who report that their specialists responded to 8,030 calls from people needing shelter in 2007, a 24 percent increase compared to 2006 (6,469 shelter calls). Connect2Help staff report that finding shelter space can be difficult. Their specialists were unable to help more than one in four of those calling for shelter. They also report that during extremely cold weather, the Winter Contingency Plan offers people a place to sleep for the night; aside from this resource (provided by two shelters), many people must go without shelter due to limited capacity at existing shelters throughout the rest of the year.

Figure 1: Race Demographics, Marion County Homeless Count, 2008

African-American , 42%

White , 25%

Asian, 0%

Hispanic, 2%

Other, 3%

Unknown, 28%

Demographics of Homelessness

While our count found fewer homeless individuals in 2008 than 2007, the gravity of the situation should not be taken lightly. According to Carter Wolf, Executive Director of Horizon House, they saw a 6 percent decrease in the number of homeless individuals from 2006 to 2007 (from 3,900 to 3,657). However, they saw an 8 percent increase in daily visits to Horizon House during the course of the year (from 61,407 to 66,281 visits). Those who are homeless and visit Horizon House are in need of more services.

We have found that homeless people do not fit a stereotype. Many would be surprised to learn that on the night of the count, we found 120 homeless families with children residing in shelters and transitional housing programs in Marion County. This

picture is more startling when we consider families that may not fit the HUD definition of homeless, but who are precariously housed in either motels/hotels or doubled-up temporarily with friends or family, putting them at high risk of becoming homeless. Our data also show that of the homeless who answered the questions about employment and schooling, approximately 23 percent were employed and approximately 21 percent were in school, including children.
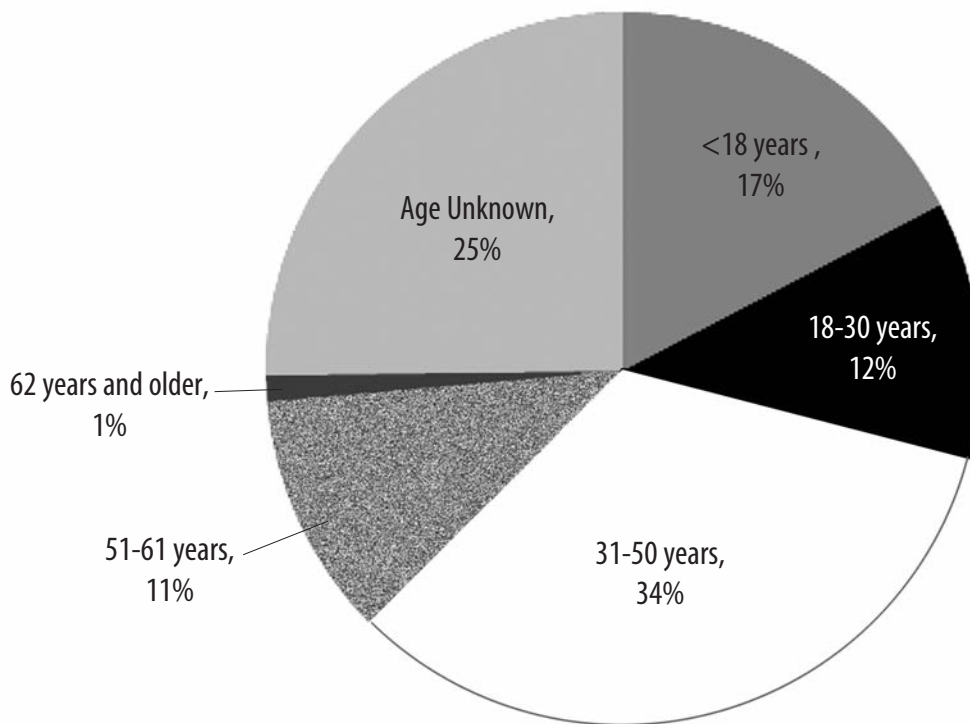
Basic demographics of the homeless population can be reported for several categories. African Americans accounted for 42 percent of those counted, whereas whites accounted for 25 percent (See Figure 1). The results in 2007 were very comparable with 46 percent African American and 28 percent white.

Youth under age 18 accounted for 17 percent of the homeless in Marion County. The age group with the highest percentage was age 31 to 50, making up nearly 34 percent of those counted (see Figure 2). Of those who were known to have or not have a substance abuse disorder, 40 percent were identified as having the disorder. In addition, of those known to have or not have a disability, 12 percent had either a mild or severe mental disability.

Figure 2: Age Demographics, Marion County Homeless Count, 2008

Thoughts for Policymakers

Though this count shows a decrease in the number of homeless from the previous year, two data points do not make a trend and numerous factors affect the count each year, including severe weather, which may draw the homeless to more hidden locations. It is also important to note that HUD's definition of homelessness does not capture a large number of Marion County's homeless. This includes individuals doubled-up with friends or "sofa surfing" and those temporarily staying in motels/hotels.

Our data show the need for a number of additional programs in Marion County. Chronic substance abuse and mental illness affect a large number of homeless. Expanding and adding additional programs aimed at providing

Approximately 23 percent were employed and approximately 21 percent were in school, including children.

this populations with resources and support to find stable employment and housing is needed. In addition, we found numerous families with children in homeless situations. There is a need in Marion County to create more affordable housing for these families.

While the homeless count provides basic demographic information about Marion County's homeless population, it does not shed light on why people are homeless. In the future, interviews or focus groups with homeless individuals and families may foster a greater understanding of the circumstances and reasons underlying homelessness. In return, this greater understanding can lead to the development and expansion of programs aimed at preventing homelessness in our community.
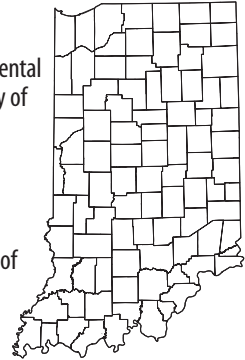
CENTER FOR HEALTH POLICY

Indiana University Center for Health Policy

The Indiana University Center for Health Policy is a nonpartisan applied research organization in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis. Researchers at CHP work on critical policy issues that affect the quality of health care delivery and access to health care. The Center for Health Policy is part of the Indiana University Public Policy Institute.

CENTER FOR HEALTH POLICY

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Non Profit
US Postage Paid
Indianapolis, IN
Permit No. 803

334 North Senate Avenue, Suite 300
Indianapolis, IN 46204-1708
www.urbancenter.iupui.edu

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND
ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS
INDIANA UNIVERSITY
IUPUI

08-C33