

Ten things to know about Canadian attempts to count homelessness through Point-in-Time Counts — by Nick Falvo

Posted November 30th, 2016

By: Nick Falvo, Ph.D, Director, Research and Data, CHF

Alberta's seven largest municipalities recently released [early results](#) of a provincially-coordinated effort to enumerate and survey persons experiencing homelessness. Most of these communities reported reductions in homelessness, and reported a 19% reduction in province-wide homelessness compared to the first provincially-coordinated count conducted in 2014.

The stated purpose of a Point-in-Time Count (PIT Count) is to provide a current snapshot of the demographics and number of people experiencing homelessness within a specific timeframe. Across Canada, these types of exercises have been going on for years—but they're not always what they seem.

Here are 10 things to know.

- 1. Local officials already keep basic information about persons sleeping in emergency shelters and other provisional housing; but they typically have very little information about persons sleeping outside.** Across Canada, most urban centres keep administrative data on persons experiencing homelessness. Indeed, local officials (often municipal government staff) keep tabs on how many people are sleeping in their emergency shelters; officials also typically know some demographic information about those persons. From time to time, communities also conduct [Point in Time \(PIT\) Counts](#) (i.e. 'PIT Counts') which seek not only to survey and count persons sleeping in emergency shelters, but also to survey and count persons sleeping outside. The recently-conducted 7 Cities PIT Count in Alberta PIT gathered data and survey information from emergency shelters, short-term and interim housing, corrections facilities, and persons outside.
- 2. For more than a decade, there have been communities in Canada conducting counts of homelessness in their community (i.e. 'PIT Counts').** Each community has used its own methodological approach, and that methodological approach often changes from year to year, all of which can impact or skew a count. According to [a guide prepared by Employment and Social Development Canada](#): "Differences include the time of year the count is conducted, the time of day the count happens, the people that are included as 'homeless,' and the questions that are asked in the survey." Other factors that can skew the result of a count include [weather conditions](#) on the night of the count and changes in the locations within a city where people experiencing homelessness are known to sleep without interference from law enforcement. Unlike data on people experiencing homelessness kept on a day-to-day basis by social workers and other front-line professionals (which I've previously [blogged about here](#)), data gathered through [PIT Counts](#) typically include a strong focus on rough sleepers (i.e. persons sleeping outside on the night of the count).

3. **In 2016, there was a national effort to coordinate PIT Counts across Canada.** During this effort, 31 communities participated, spanning seven provinces and one territory. Each of these communities did their counts between January 1 and April 30. For many communities, this was the first time they'd done a PIT Count. Everyone used the same group of core questions. Training workshops were held in November 2015 and in early 2016. A module was created by [Employment and Social Development Canada \(ESDC\)](#), and the [Canadian Observatory on Homelessness](#) created a [toolkit](#). The report with findings from the 2016 national effort will likely be released by ESDC in the near future.
4. **Canada's most populous cities chose not to participate in the 2016 nationally-coordinated effort.** One reason some cities chose not to participate in the nationally-coordinated effort was that the time of year chosen was not ideal for them. It's hard for some communities to find volunteers when it's cold outside. And although communities counting as late as April were ultimately included in the national effort, the original time frame chosen by the federal government was in the dead of winter. Another reason many cities chose not to participate is that counting homeless persons when it's extremely cold outside runs the risk of under-counting rough sleepers. Finally, some cities had done their previous count just a short period earlier, so an early-2016 count would not have been practical. Cities choosing not to participate in the nationally-coordinated effort include: Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Ottawa and Winnipeg. (As mentioned above, however, at the provincial level Alberta's seven major cities did participate in Canada's first provincially-coordinated PIT Count in October of 2014 with a commitment to count again in October of 2016.)
5. **PIT Counts combine research and advocacy—and that can be messy.** Researchers and policy-makers find it helpful to have accurate data about homeless populations. However, local officials wanting to demonstrate progress in "[ending homelessness](#)" sometimes see the results of PIT Counts as 'progress reports.' This can create a tension between those wanting accuracy, on the one hand, with those wanting to present an ongoing picture of progress to all stakeholders. Some local officials responsible for undertaking PIT Counts are therefore in a conflict of interest situation. (Remember: local communities decide what kind of methodology to use and how to change their methodology from one year to the next. Communities intent on demonstrating progress in "ending homelessness" may find it tempting to adjust methodologies to create opportunities to present a lower 'final number' than previously announced...)
6. **Officials in some communities may (quietly) hope they end up with a smaller 'count size;' officials in other communities may (quietly) hope to end up with a larger 'count size.'** Admittedly, not every community takes the same approach to advocacy. While many want to 'show progress' by ending up with a smaller number of individuals enumerated, others may want to end up with a larger number (in order to show funders that further resources are needed in order to end homelessness). This may depend on whether local officials choose a 'glass half full' approach to advocacy or a 'glass half empty' approach. (I discuss both of these approaches in [this previous blog post](#).)
7. **One challenge with PIT Counts is the need to balance methodological consistency and rigour, on the one hand, with community flexibility and need, on the other.** As I'll discuss in point #9

below, [Statistics Canada](#) could potentially be resourced to assist with future PIT Counts; this might result in more methodological consistency across years and across jurisdictions. However, many Canadian cities have an established methodology that works for their community that has been developed over many years. This allows for year over year comparisons within the community but limited comparisons across jurisdictions. As well, these communities often have a very well-organized network of volunteers who support their endeavours and use the PIT Count as an opportunity to raise awareness of homelessness in the community through media engagement and opportunities to involve political leadership in the count.

8. **I think an unresolved methodological question with PIT Counts is whether the outdoor (i.e. rough sleeper) component of a community's PIT Count results should be interpreted as being [representative](#) of that community's outdoor homeless population.** In other words, if 20% of homeless persons enumerated outside in Toronto's PIT Count are over the age of 65, is it reasonable to infer from this that 20% of Toronto's actual outdoor homeless population is also over the age of 65? I think most people who read results of PIT Counts have a tendency to assume that the results for most cities are representative; but careful researchers will acknowledge that this may not always be the case. I think the more confident enumerators are that most regions of their city with rough sleepers have been covered in a PIT Count, the more reasonable it is to infer that that city's PIT Count results are indeed representative of that city's actual homeless population.
9. **The federal government could add methodological rigour to PIT Counts by asking Statistics Canada to assist with a federally-coordinated PIT Count effort.** Indeed, ESDC could fund Statistics Canada to develop a methodology and train volunteers to conduct a survey that would seek to be representative of each community's homeless population. Under this scenario, volunteers trained by Statistics Canada officials would conduct face-to-face interviews with persons experiencing homelessness. This survey could be done yearly and, once complete, an aggregation of the data collected could be made available at the [CANSIM](#) web site. A key advantage of Statistics Canada being involved is that survey design and administration is their area of expertise. Under this approach, there would be one common methodology used to collect data across Canada (rather than several dozen, as is currently the case) and this would allow for comparisons across jurisdictions and across time. This could also help address the potential conflict of interest situation discussed in point #5 above—indeed, Statistics Canada officials would ensure (if not require) methodological consistency across communities.
10. **There are several advantages to the status quo approach.** In addition to the advantages mentioned in point #7 above (pertaining to volunteer recruitment), another advantage of the status quo approach is community control. Indeed, under the existing system (whereby each community conducts its own count) if local organizers want to add new questions or rephrase existing ones, they can do so at their own discretion.

Going forward. In 2018, the federal government will once again attempt a nationally-coordinated PIT Count. Participating communities will be asked to conduct their counts in either March or April that



year. Each participating community will also receive funding from ESDC to use toward the effort. More information on the “second Canadian coordinated homeless count” [can be found here](#).

The following persons provided invaluable assistance in the preparation of this blog post: Robbie Brydon, Rachel Campbell, Wally Czech, Jesse Donaldson, Louise Gallagher, Darcy Halber, Patrick Hunter, Nicole Jackson, Ali Jadidzadeh, Kevin McNichol, Adam Melnyk, Tim Richter, John Rowland and Munir Sheikh. The views expressed in this blog post are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Calgary Homeless Foundation. Any errors lie with the author.