

Homelessness in Washington, DC – a review of the numbers, and a holistic overview

How is homelessness defined and measured? Homelessness is defined in many ways by various government programs, providers, and homeless persons themselves,ⁱ but for our purposes, the definitions provided by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under “the HEARTH Act”ⁱⁱ are the most pertinent.

The HEARTH regulations set out four categories under which an individual or a family may qualify as homeless.ⁱⁱⁱ They are:

- Individuals and families who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence;^{iv}
- Individuals and families who will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence;
- Unaccompanied youth [under age 25] and families with children and youth who are defined as homeless under certain other federal statutes who do not otherwise qualify as homeless under this group of four definitions; and
- Individuals and families who are fleeing, or attempting to flee, domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or a family member.

Since the early 1990s, HUD has required communities to assess homeless needs in order for them (and the homeless services programs in those communities) to apply for homeless-services funding under the McKinney-Vento Act “Continuum of Care.”^v A Continuum of Care “seeks to relieve the immediate suffering of homeless persons while working to help them obtain and maintain permanent or supportive housing in the most integrated setting possible.”^{vi} As part of their funding application process to HUD, each community is required to conduct an annual “Point in Time” (PIT) homelessness enumeration. The PIT count is a one-day “snapshot”^{vii} of the homeless population in the jurisdiction; it is not a count of how many people are homeless in the community over the course of a year.^{viii}

How many people are homeless in DC? The January 30-31, 2013, “Point in Time census and survey” of homeless persons in the District of Columbia^{ix} showed the following:

The total number of homeless persons counted was **6,865**. These included 512 unsheltered persons (e.g., “on the street,” or in other situations not intended for human habitation); 4,010 in emergency shelters; and 2,343 in transitional housing facilities. More than half of the homeless persons in the entire metropolitan Washington, DC region^x resided in Washington, DC.

Trends. Although the 2013 PIT count for DC shows a 1% decline in the number of homeless persons in the District of Columbia since the prior year, in looking back over five years, the 2013 count is a 10% *increase* in the number counted since 2009—an increase of 637 homeless persons. This increase is attributed to several factors: high rents in the region; a lag in wages that have not kept pace with rising housing costs; and a shortage of living-wage jobs.^{xi} For the near future, policymakers and analysts including the District’s Chief Financial Officer^{xii} express concerns about potential funding cuts to federal programs as a result of “sequestration.” Among the federal programs vulnerable to cutbacks are Housing Choice Vouchers and the HUD Homeless Continuum of Care.^{xiii}

Of the 6,865 total counted as homeless in DC, 3,169 were persons in 983 **families**; they included 1,868 children. This is a 38.1% *increase* in the number of persons in families since 2009.

Although only 6 homeless unaccompanied young people were counted in this official PIT, a 2011 study estimated that 3,000-6,000 children and young people ages 10-24 live apart from parents/guardians over the course of a year in DC.^{xiv} At any given time, all the beds for this population are full and there is a considerable waiting list.^{xv}

There were 3,690 “single adults.” This is a 6.2% *decrease* since 2009.

The 512 **unsheltered persons** counted in DC in 2013 are 157 fewer than in 2012, partly because of a significant federal-city effort to house homeless veterans and because of several initiatives to house non-veterans. However, a look at the unsheltered homeless category across the past five years reveals a 60% *increase* since the 2009 count. This increase may reflect the significant job losses and income declines during the Recession, as well as the loss of affordable-housing sites. Unsheltered persons constitute 7.5% of the total of literally homeless persons in the District (512/6865).

Among all the persons counted, 499 were veterans. This is a 29% reduction from the number counted in 2009.

Not everyone who is in a homeless shelter on one given night is homeless for an extended period of time. Over a 5-year period, women stayed in DC’s low-barrier shelter a median number of 27 nights, and males 14 nights. Women-headed families stayed in front-line shelter a median number of 108 nights, and men-headed families stayed 109 nights.^{xvi}

Of the 6,865 total homeless persons counted in DC in 2013, 1,764 unaccompanied adults^{xvii} and 83 adults in families met the HUD definition as being “**chronically homeless**,” i.e., they were living with a disabling condition while being homeless for more than a year or while being homeless four times in the past three years. Of the 512 persons “on the street,” 90% (461) were chronically homeless.

The definition of “chronically homeless” has recently expanded to include families that have at least one adult, 18 or older, who fits the above definition.^{xviii} The District of Columbia shelters 83 chronically homeless families.^{xix}

Most of the chronically homeless persons in the region suffer from **severe impediments** such as severe physical health or mental health problems, or obstacles related to domestic violence. Many have “multiple challenges.”^{xx}

For all homeless persons counted in DC in 2013, **obstacles to self-sufficiency** revealed by the 2013 Point in Time include:

- Age: The median age of homeless individuals unaccompanied by children was 51.
- Illness and health challenges: 23% of homeless adults reported histories of mental illness or substance abuse, and one in ten reported living with both of those conditions. 18% of adults reported a physical disability, and 10% reported a chronic health problem.
- Domestic violence: 15% of homeless adults reported a history of domestic violence, and 3% (including 84 heads of households) reported that the violence had directly caused their homelessness.
- Lack of money: 45% of unaccompanied adults and 18% of adults in families reported that they had no income of any kind. Of the homeless adults in families in DC, only 25% are employed, and only 20% of homeless unaccompanied adults are employed. Generally, for homeless

persons in the region who have any income at all, the next largest sources of income after employment include disability income (such as Supplemental Security Income), public assistance (such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), and other sources such as Social Security.

In addition to counting homeless persons, the District counts **formerly homeless persons** who are now in Permanent Supportive Housing. In 2013, the District counted 7,272 Permanent Supportive Housing beds available for formerly homeless persons.^{xxi} The beds are in more than 3,600 units of housing for individuals and another 1,100 units for families—an increase of more than 10% from the housing inventory count conducted a year earlier.^{xxii} At the time of the PIT count, 3,690 formerly homeless “singles” were in permanent supportive housing, as were 983 formerly homeless families, comprising 1,301 adults and 2,300 children.^{xxiii} These formerly homeless persons are *in addition to* the 6,865 counted as currently homeless. It is widely believed that the expansion of Permanent Supportive Housing is the reason the currently homeless count has not increased more significantly during the Recession than it has.^{xxiv}

What do homeless people need, and what is available to them in Washington, DC? From SOME’s viewpoint, the first thing a homeless person needs is to be treated with respect and dignity. Homeless persons are individuals with life stories to tell, and SOME encourages them to tell their stories and ask for what they need.

Continuum of services. Over the past four decades, our guests and clients have told us that they need food, housing, medical care, oral-health care, help to recover from substance abuse, mental health services, jobs, and temporary income supports such as Interim Disability Assistance and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). SOME has responded with an ever-expanding continuum of our own direct-service programs and with advocacy on all those issues.

Prevention. People need help to stay in their housing and avoid becoming homeless. One of SOME’s programs provides community support to assist extremely low-income seniors so they can remain in their homes and communities. Other people need financial assistance to prevent homelessness. One program that provides this help is the DC Emergency Rental Assistance Program (**ERAP**). This program, administered by the DC Department of Human Services, helps low-income District residents with overdue rent and related legal costs when they face eviction. The program also provides security deposits and first month’s rent for residents moving into new homes. The District currently contracts with four non-profit organizations throughout the city to manage the intake, eligibility screening and payments of the ERAP program.^{xxv} Until recently, the only persons eligible for this program were families or households that included a person over age 60 or a person with a disability. Starting October 1, 2013, the Department of Human Services will initiate a pilot program that will allow unaccompanied adults who are not age 60 and not disabled to be eligible for this program. SOME advocated for this pilot program.

Quick re-housing of persons who have become homeless. To stabilize families as quickly as possible and to free up shelter space for other homeless families, a **Rapid Re-Housing** Program was started in the District.^{xxvi} Also known as the Family Re-Housing and Stabilization Program (FRSP), this program provides housing search assistance, supportive services, and short-term rental assistance to homeless families.^{xxvii} Starting October 1, 2013, the Department of Human Services will initiate another pilot program to offer these services to unaccompanied homeless adults. SOME also advocated for funding of this pilot.

Shelter and safety. While they wait for more permanent housing to be made available, some of our patients, Dining Room guests and clients reside in City-funded **emergency shelters and temporary housing**. By law, the District is not required to provide shelter except when the actual or forecasted temperature or wind chill is 32 degrees Fahrenheit or below (Hypothermia, a life-endangering situation).^{xxviii} In practice, however, the District contracts with several providers to keep shelters or other contracted facilities open for men, women and families year-round. On a typical summer night there are approximately 900 men, 320 women, and 880 families (1,080 persons in families). But there are very crucial caveats to that statement. New families are not admitted to shelter except during Hypothermia alerts, and men and women can be turned away from shelter on a night when the shelters are full and there is not a Hypothermia alert.

Across the District, several thousand homeless people seek shelter during hypothermic conditions. On such occasions, the District is required to call an Alert and provide additional beds for homeless men and women and eligible families. To assist in proper implementation of these life-saving plans, SOME tracks weather, alert status, and shelter system data for every day of “Hypothermia Season”^{xxix} and helps prepare the District’s official annual Winter Homelessness Plan.^{xxx} Typically, the Winter Plan anticipates the need to shelter as many as 1,376 men and 426 women on Alert nights. It also anticipates providing shelter or other housing for as many as 509 new families during the Hypothermia “Season.”

Permanent supportive housing (PSH). **Permanent supportive housing** provides wrap-around services to help formerly homeless persons live as independently as possible. Services can include life skills training, substance abuse counseling, health care, mental health services, and job training. In the Metropolitan Washington region, PSH is made possible by local governments, nonprofit organizations and other human services organizations.^{xxxi}

SOME is one of the nonprofit organizations in Washington, DC, that has undertaken a major effort since 2005 to expand permanent supportive housing for extremely low-income District residents. SOME is currently providing housing and supportive services for approximately 700 adults (480 singles and 220 parents) and 290 children in 615 long-term units, and it is in the process of developing 328 more units for singles and for families. We participate in coalitions of housing developers and financial institutions that are committed to dignified housing for low-income residents of the District. We strongly advocate for government-private partnerships that make that housing possible.^{xxxii}

In addition, SOME advocates for additional funding of the Department of Human Services’ own Permanent Supportive Housing Program (also known as “**Housing First**”), which relocates the most vulnerable homeless persons from streets or from shelter into apartments and provides case management to assist this transition. To date, 1,596 persons have been housed in that program.^{xxxiii}

Coordinated services and a strategy to end homelessness. In 2005, the District enacted a **Homeless Services Reform Act**, which (1) established an **Interagency Council on Homelessness**;^{xxxiv} (2) established when there is a right to shelter in the District;^{xxxv} and (3) set out the rights and responsibilities of persons who use homeless services as well as rights and responsibilities of organizations that provide those services.^{xxxvi} The ICH issued a **Strategic Action Plan to End Homelessness** in 2010.^{xxxvii} Meetings of the ICH and its committees are open to the public. SOME participates on virtually all the ICH committees and hosts some of its meetings.

What is the future of Homeless Services in the Nation’s Capital?

Sustaining safety-net programs in Washington, DC, has been a challenge during the Recession, which started to affect DC significantly in late 2007-early 2008. Demands for services from local homeless-services nonprofits increased by about 20% in one year, continued to rise every year for several years, and still have not returned to pre-Recession levels. Persons who had been the “working poor” started to show up at meal programs and other homeless-services programs. There was a double-digit increase in the number of homeless families, in particular.

At the same time, the District budget was under pressure. Only a sustained effort by hundreds of nonprofit organizations, with support from the local community, succeeded in reversing what would have been \$75 million in cuts in 2011 and \$50 million in 2013. Even so, some service programs had to close their doors. Finally, in spring 2013, it was evident that the District’s economy was on the rebound. The Mayor proposed very significant new investments in affordable housing and homelessness prevention, which will begin to address the issues that were identified in earlier plans to end homelessness; and the Council further increased those investments. These changes should take effect in Fiscal Year 2014.

These newly won investments must continue and grow. They are only the “seed money” for investments that, intelligently used, will start to implement long-deferred programs that had been planned a decade earlier. At the same time, there remains concern about the duration of the District’s financial recovery and the potential impact of federal sequestration on programs for people who need them the most. These are people who have virtually nothing—and sometimes nothing at all—and have been waiting years for housing, job training, literacy training and other help. In the meantime, they strive to survive every day.

Support from the community is the key. Community groups of all descriptions, faith groups, educational institutions, businesses, and associations, are needed to voice their support for reducing the pain of homelessness for those suffering now and their support for ending homelessness.

How can you help?

SOME’s Advocacy & Social Justice Department invites your participation in our Advocacy Network (sign up here: http://salsa3.salsalabs.com/o/50983/p/salsa/web/common/public/signup?signup_page_KEY=7663). We make it as easy as possible to stay current and voice your opinion to policymakers. We invite your group and friends to schedule a visit to us to tour Main SOME and participate in a Social Justice Reflection. The Department frequently seeks volunteers or interns, preferably at the senior year in college or beyond. To apply, please contact us at advocacy@some.org or 202.797.8806, ext. 2112 or 2107.

Thank you for your support.

ⁱ Cheryl Barnes, homeless advocate, says, “Until you have a lease and a key, you are homeless.”

ⁱⁱ Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition Housing Act of 2009. The final federal rules that define homelessness to implement the HEARTH Act were issued in 2011, effective January 2012. See https://www.onecpd.info/resources/documents/HEARTH_HomelessDefinition_FinalRule.pdf. Service providers who participate in a HUD-funded program must be careful to make sure that people who are helped by their program can be shown to be eligible for that particular program. An overview

can be found at <https://www.onecpd.info/resource/2020/the-homeless-definition-and-eligibility-for-shp-spc-and-esg/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ HEARTH Homeless Definition, Final Rule, *supra*. Many persons in the DC community comment that these definitions exclude persons who are “couch-surfing” or otherwise do not have their own housing. HUD states in its Final Rulemaking that it cannot include “couch-surfing” because it is required to track the federal law (HEARTH Act), and that law does not include “couch-surfing” unaccompanied adults (without children) as homeless.

^{iv} This includes an individual who resided in an emergency shelter or a place not meant for human habitation and who is exiting an institution where he/she temporarily resided.

^v McKinney-Vento, a multifaceted response to homelessness, was reauthorized by the U.S. Congress in 2009 as the HEARTH Act.

^{vi} MWCOG 2013, p. 40. *See also* D.C. Code §§ 4-753.01 et seq.

^{vii} The one-day count is actually conducted in the night-time; it includes data collected via the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) system from shelters and transitional housing sites as well as data collected by professional outreach workers and volunteers who survey homeless persons found in doorways, parks and other locations. Occasionally, such as when there is a snowstorm on the night of the survey, the count is extended to the next day so homeless persons can be surveyed in day programs and food programs. *Also note that the numbers in the counts may vary from year to year in part because on the night of one year’s count, there was no Hypothermia Alert, while on the night of another year’s count, there happened not to be an Alert. There are fewer shelter beds available when there is no Alert.*

^{viii} For a history of the PIT, see <http://www.huduser.org/Publications/pdf/ahar.pdf>. An estimated 18,500 persons are homeless in DC during the course of a year. http://www.marycheh.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=370:cheh-graham-layout-plan-to-end-homelessness-in-dc-within-10-years&catid=37:press-release&Itemid=68

^{ix} *Homelessness in Metropolitan Washington: Results and Analysis from the 2013 Point-in-Time Count of Homeless Persons in the Metropolitan Washington Region* (Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, May 8, 2013), hereinafter “MWCOG 2013.”

^x The region includes 5 counties in Northern Virginia and 3 counties in Maryland. The population of the District of Columbia is approximately 632,000, and the regional population is over 5 million.

^{xi} MWCOG 2013, p. 23.

^{xii} June 24, 2013, letter from the CFO to the Mayor and Council Chairman regarding FY 2013 - FY 2017 revenue estimates. http://cfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ocfo/release_content/attachments/Revenue%20Estimates%20--%20June%202013.pdf

^{xiii} MWCOG 2013, p. 26.

^{xiv} These include children and youth “thrown out” from their homes or otherwise unable to return safely to their homes. “From the Streets to Stability: A study of youth homelessness in the District of Columbia,” p. 32 (M. Riden, A.M. Jones, DC Alliance of Youth Advocates, Nov. 2011), http://www.dca.org/sites/default/files/content/ya_essay_r3.pdf.

^{xv} E-mail communication from Maggie Riden, Executive Director of DC Alliance of Youth Advocates, August 21, 2013, to Nechama Masliansky, SOME.

^{xvi} “Long Stayers in the District of Columbia Emergency Shelters,” T. Fredericksen, J. Lucio, D. Tweedie (The Community Partnership for The Prevention of Homelessness, April 2013). <http://www.community-partnership.org/facts-and-figures>

^{xvii} “Unaccompanied adults” are those who do not have children with them.

^{xviii} Persons under age 18 are not counted as chronically homeless individuals, and other adults in the family who do not meet the HUD definition are not counted as chronically homeless individuals; but all members of the family household are counted as persons in a chronically homeless family. MWCOG 2013, p. 15.

^{xix} MWCOG 2013, p. 15

^{xx} MWCOG 2013, p. 15.

^{xxi} MWCOG 2013, p. 23.

^{xxii} MWCOG 2013, p. 41.

^{xxiii} MWCOG 2013, p.44.

^{xxiv} See, e.g., MWCOG 2013, p. 44.

^{xxv} “Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP),” <http://www.dcfpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/4-27-12-ERAP-Brief-FINAL1.pdf> (DC Fiscal Policy Institute, April 27, 2012).

^{xxvi} This followed successful local implementation of the federally funded Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program. MWCOG 2013, p. 26.

^{xxvii} “FY14 Budget Toolkit—Homeless Services,” http://www.dcfpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/7-18-13-FY-14-Budget-Toolkit_Homeless-Services-final.pdf. (DC Fiscal Policy Institute, July 15, 2013).

^{xxviii} D.C. Code § 4-754.11(5).

^{xxix} See <http://www.cohho.org/reports/>.

^{xxx} See www.ich.dc.gov.

^{xxxi} MWCOG 2013, p. 22.

^{xxxii} See Affordable Housing.

^{xxxiii} <http://www.fairbudget.org/housing-first-a-proven-solution-to-end-chronic-homelessness/>

^{xxxiv} D.C. Code §§ 4-752.01 – 4-752.03.

^{xxxv} D.C. Code § 4-754.11(5).

^{xxxvi} D.C. Code §§ 4-754.01 et seq. See also www.ich.dc.gov, www.cohho.org/resources. An annual calendar of the plenary ICH meetings may be found on the ICH website. A calendar including ICH committee and subcommittee meetings may be found on the COHHO website.

^{xxxvii} See www.cohho.org/calendar.