

Has Unsheltered Homelessness really decreased?

OVERVIEW:

While the 2017 HUD AHAR Part 1 reported a 25% drop in unsheltered homelessness since 2007, a closer look at the PIT data provides evidence that much of this decrease may be the product of overestimates from select communities in previous years, especially during the 2007 to 2011 time period. In addition, removing the counts of veterans homelessness, any decrease in unsheltered homelessness among non-veterans (90% of the population) over the past 11 years may be minimal at best.

It is well known that Point-In-Time estimates of unsheltered homelessness are fraught with multiple problems of accuracy. This is especially true for large geographical regions (rural, multi-county Continuums) and densely-populated urban areas. The NHIP reviewed 11 years worth of PIT estimates submitted by 400+ CoCs from 2007 to 2017 to identify possible statistical anomalies. PIT anomalies were defined as CoCs with very large (50% or more) fluctuations in year-to-year estimates. When a community reports a large change - increase or decrease - in unsheltered homelessness, it is highly likely that the change is not due to a real change in the number of unsheltered homeless, but rather a change in the count methodology.

By reviewing 11 years of data estimates for each CoC, it is possible to identify and "smooth" these large fluctuations in an attempt to offer a more likely trend of PIT data. The NHIP proposes three types of PIT trends that should be analyzed to determine if smoothing is likely needed to improve historical accuracy of data trends. Examples of communities that exhibits these trends are described below.

COMMUNITIES WITH LARGE FLUCTUATIONS

A total of 22 communities were identified as having very large fluctuations over the 11 year period. The table below displays the communities and their annual PIT unsheltered count estimates. It should be noted that from 2007 to 2012 most communities only completed a PIT unsheltered count every two years.

Data in RED denote years where PIT estimates fluctuated greatly, with estimates increasing anywhere from 10 fold or more, or decreases as large as 80%. The 22 communities do not represent the entire universe of CoCs with large fluctuations, but they do represent large CoCs where estimates can heavily influence the national aggregate PIT unsheltered estimate. Below are a select group within the 22 CoCs that generally fall into one of three trends.

		2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Santa Rosa/Petaluma/Sonoma County CoC	CA-504	532	532	2,222	2,222	3,366	3,366	3,309	3,309	2,060	1,906	1,847
Richmond/Contra Costa County CoC	CA-505	3,159	3,159	1,872	1,872	1,490	1,490	1,329	1,329	1,327	1,110	911
Fresno/Madera County CoC	CA-514	1,512	1,556	2,457	2,457	3,822	3,822	2,537	1,883	1,183	1,431	1,529
Merced City & County CoC	CA-520	2,420	2,320	224	224	299	338	255	609	743	356	298
Los Angeles City & County CoC	CA-600	36,420	36,420	19,193	19,193	17,740	17,740	22,590	22,590	28,948	32,781	41,216
Santa Ana/Anaheim/Orange County CoC	CA-602	1,071	1,071	5,724	5,724	4,272	4,272	1,678	1,678	2,201	2,201	2,584
Riverside City & County CoC	CA-608	3,178	3,178	2,043	2,043	5,090	5,090	1,888	1,888	1,488	1,351	1,638
San Bernardino City & County CoC	CA-609	5,749	5,749	1,258	1,258	1,692	1,692	1,247	1,247	1,311	1,191	1,179
San Luis Obispo County CoC	CA-614	2,221	569	3,587	3,587	1,901	1,901	2,122	2,122	1,123	1,123	822
Colorado Balance of State CoC	CO-500	3,357	3,955	4,180	4,180	8,268	8,268	1,005	1,005	1,831	1,831	2,508
Metropolitan Denver Homeless Initiative	CO-503	3,513	3,531	1,699	1,699	532	964	928	671	745	797	894
Tampa/Hillsborough County CoC	FL-501	5,433	5,433	6,747	6,747	6,447	6,447	944	1,091	756	769	567
Palm Bay/Melbourne/Brevard County CoC	FL-513	1,397	1,397	219	219	1,217	1,319	860	860	388	183	253
Hendry, Hardee, Highlands Counties CoC	FL-517	240	2,867	4,119	4,119	1,205	1,205	3,711	1,112	940	758	518
Georgia Balance of State CoC	GA-501	2,115	7,073	7,807	7,807	8,855	8,855	5,317	5,317	3,518	3,518	1,873
Kentucky Balance of State CoC	KY-500	1,895	1,611	486	742	701	701	600	670	622	573	525
New Orleans/Jefferson Parish CoC	LA-503	629	629	7,385	7,385	5,374	3,439	1,039	818	789	717	525
Baltimore City CoC	MD-501	629	629	406	302	1,795	278	295	177	337	337	546
Detroit CoC	MI-501	13,324	13,324	262	262	353	353	282	282	151	193	220
North Dakota Statewide CoC	ND-500	59	19	8	31	43	53	1,395	464	486	216	331
Texas Balance of State (BoS) CoC	TX-607	5,960	6,039	9,683	10,461	10,589	9,422	6,190	5,880	2,926	2,388	3,570
Houston/Harris County	TX-700	5,346	5,346	2,119	2,119	4,418	3,824	2,978	2,291	1,950	1,196	1,128
TOTAL 22 Communities		100,159	106,407	83,700	84,653	89,469	84,839	62,499	57,293	55,823	56,926	65,482

COMMUNITIES WITH ONE-TIME LARGE CHANGES (Type 1)

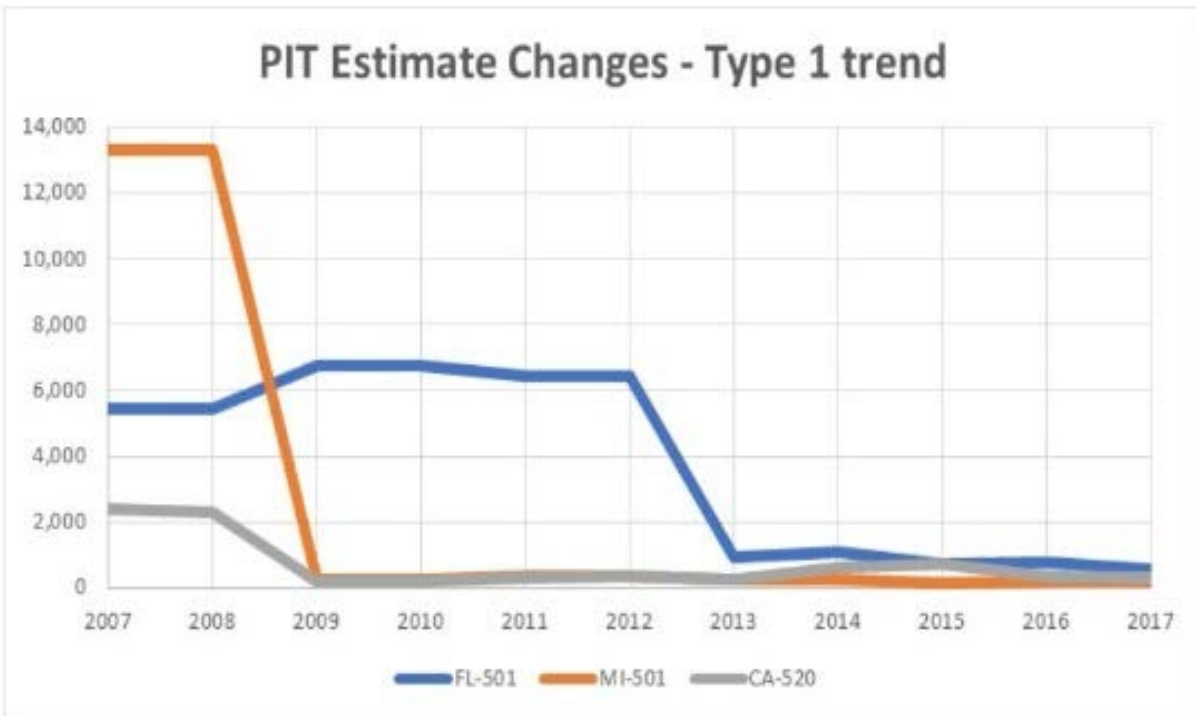
Three (3) communities reported an extremely large decrease from one count to the next count. After the adjustment, the counts then remained stable. It is extremely likely and somewhat obvious (in some cases) that the initial higher estimate has little to no validity. See graph below.

1) Detroit, MI - The "Motor City" reported a decrease over a two-year period (2008 PIT counts were not required) from 13,324 in 2007 to 262 in 2009. The 2007 estimate has a high likely for being totally inaccurate and likely represented estimates from key stakeholders without any physical reenumeration. Estimates since 2009 have been relatively stable between 200 to 350 unsheltered persons.

2) Merced, CA - A reduction from 2,320 in 2008 to 224 in 2009 was reported by CA-520. Since 2009, estimates have all been below 800 with the most recent estimates around 300. Like Detroit, the original 2007 estimate is likely not based on a sound methodology.

3) Tampa, FL - Tampa reported a 500% decrease in 2013 with their estimate dropping from 6,447 in 2011 in 944 in 2013 (no count in 2012). Since 2013, counts have only exceeded 1,000 once.

The total decreases from these three (3) communities exceed 20,000. These communities account for nearly 1/3 of the reported homelessness decrease since 2007.

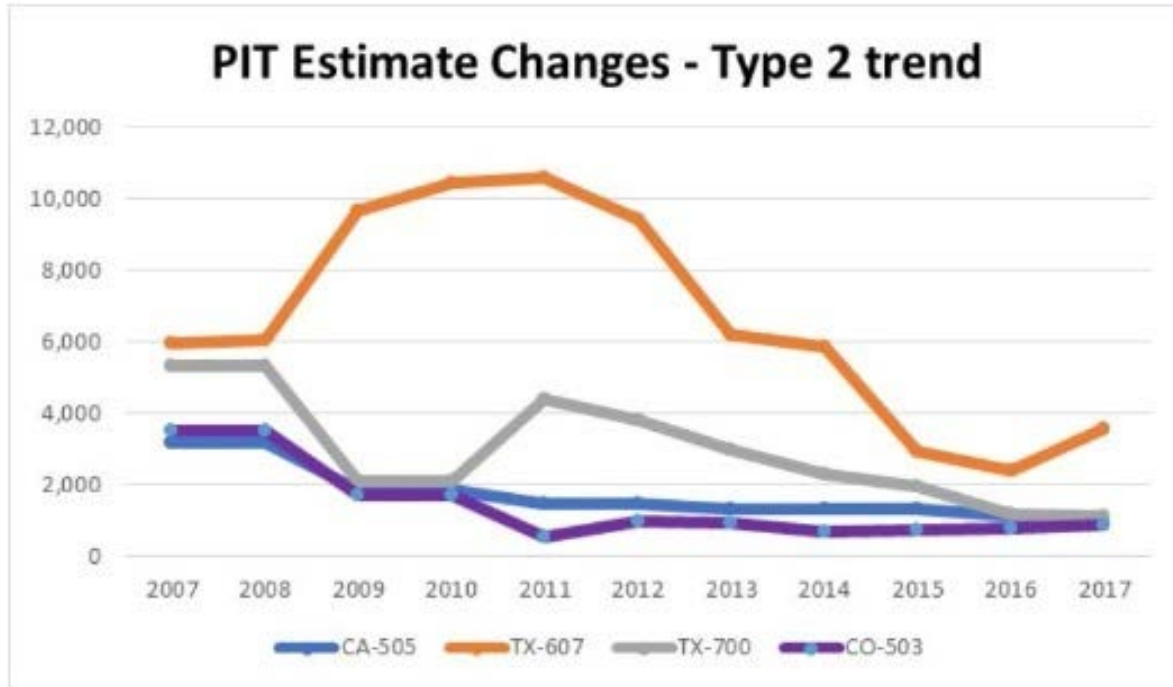


COMMUNITIES WITH MULTIPLE LARGE DECREASES (Type 2)

Five (5) Continuums are characterized by multiple decreases which have a high likelihood of being the result of changes in methodology, not actual decreases. Two are Balance of State Continuums with large geographic areas that create numerous problems in generating accurate counts. Large fluctuations may be subject to one or more Counties in the BOS not reporting counts during the year. Two CoCs are large urban areas that likely have experienced real decreases, but not as big as reported. See graph below.

- 1) Richmond/Contra Costa, CA - A large drop from 2007 to 2009 (3,159 to 1,872) followed by several drops of 20% through 2017. There was a total drop from of 75% from 2007 to 2017 and a 50% drop from 2010 to 2017.
- 2) Denver, CO - The Denver count saw two 50%+ drop from 2007 to 2009 and 2009 to 2011. Over the last six years, the estimate have remained in the 500 to 1,000 count range.
- 3) Texas Balance of State - From 2007 to 2011, estimates rose several times peaking at 10,589 in 2011. From 2012 to 2016, the estimate decrease 80% from 10,589 to 2,388 which was followed by a 50% increase in 2017 to 3,570.

4) Houston/Harris County - Houston is characterized by three large decreases: 1) 60% decrease from 2007 to 2009, 2) 40% decrease over two years from 2011 to 2013, and 3) 40% decrease from 2015 to 2016. Houston has documented several changes in methodology over the years supporting the probability of overestimates in several historical counts.



COMMUNITIES WITH LARGE UPSWINGS AND DOWNSWINGS (Type 3)

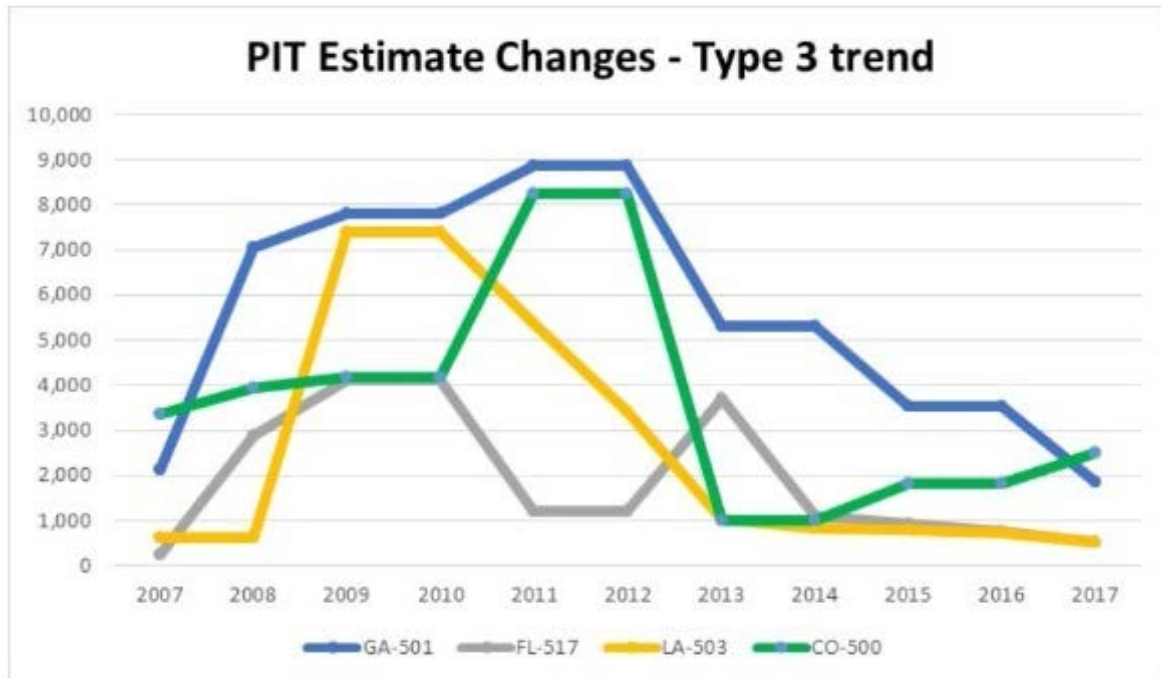
1. Los Angeles, CA - Over the past 11 years, the unsheltered count for LA has fluctuated between 18,740 and 41,216 including a drop of 50% from 2007 to 2012 and an increase of more than 100% since 2012. These numbers have a high likelihood of error. It is more likely that LA only experienced a small drop followed by a rebound that has brought the count higher than the original 2007 total. (not shown on graph)

2) Colorado Balance of State - From 2007 to 2012, the CO BOS rose 200%+ from under 4,000 to over 8,000. The estimate then fell by 7,000 from 8,268 to 1,005 in 2013. The estimate has risen slowly in the last two biennial counts but remain lower than the original 2007 count.

3. Hendry, Hardee, Highlands, FL - Large fluctuations have occurred in south-central Florida. A rise from 240 in 2007 to 4,119 just two years later was followed by a 75% decrease in 2011 and then a 200% increase in 2013 with a subsequent fall of nearly 80% to the current 2017 count of 518 persons.

4. New Orleans, LA - Homeless counts from the "Big Easy" have also seen tremendous shifts from a 1000% increase from 2007 to 2009 to a 90% decrease during the 2010 to 2014 period. Counts have continued to decrease over the past five years with the most current count of only 525 persons unsheltered in 2017.

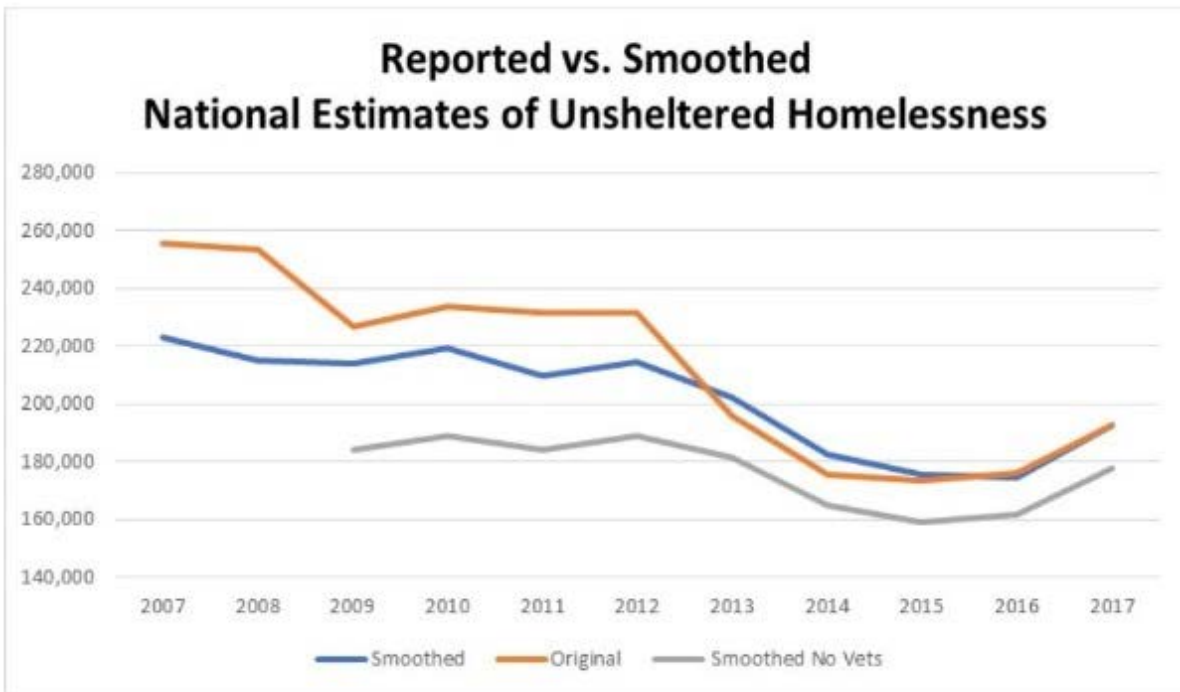
5. Georgia Balance of State - A similar pattern is seen with GA BOS data with a 300% rise from 2007 to 2011 followed by a 75% since the 2011 count.



ESTIMATES WITH DATA SMOOTHING

In an effort to approximate a more likely scenario of changes in the PIT count, the NHIP "smoothed" out data from cities with large fluctuations including eliminating initial overestimates in Detroit, Merced and Tampa. The figure below compares the national PIT count with revised estimates using the smoothed data from the 22 select communities. The graph also adds a third line which uses the smoothed line as a base and subtracts the annual veterans estimated counts from each year.

Comparing the HUD PIT count data trend with the smoothed line data, the size of the decrease between 2007 and 2017 (14%) or even since 2010 (7%) is significantly less than current HUD reporting in the AHAR (25% and 15%, respectively). The three CoCs identified as having Type 1 trends (Detroit, Merced, Tampa) contribute most of the change once their PIT counts were adjusted.



A comparison of the third line (smoothed without veterans), the drop in non-veterans unsheltered homelessness is reduced to only 3.5% with the 2009 estimate just above 180,000 and the 2017 just below 180,000. With the influx of 87,000 VASH vouchers for veterans since 2007, the unsheltered veterans drop from an estimated 29,958 in 2009 to 15,366 in 2017 has more validity. In addition, the general decrease in the number of living veterans, especially vietnam veterans who have a high incidence of homelessness.

CONCLUSION

Given the importance in monitoring the trend of homelessness, especially unsheltered persons, a more rigorous review of early counts during the 2007 to 2013 period is critical to understanding whether current policies are making enough inroads into reducing unsheltered homelessness. While the report is not a comprehensive look at the trend of each CoC and investigation that includes discussion with each community, the study does provide support for an overall PIT decrease over the past 11 years that is significantly less than reported on HUD AHAR reports. Results from this study strongly support the need for a rigorous review of PIT data from many communities.

The continued lack of quality control and funding of community and national estimates causes much public confusion about the true trends in unsheltered living. Inaccurate data also negates any conclusion about whether current solutions are significantly sufficient especially as new

persons enter homelessness each year. The NHIP continues to advocate for a much more rigorous process which includes the use of quality measures such as plant-capture method, more frequent counts, and external evaluations of community counts especially BOS and large urban areas.

At a minimum, HUD and its contractors need to provide much more caveats to any publications using PIT count data to inform the public that any data on homeless incidence especially unsheltered counts may have significant errors which could possibly eliminate any evidence of progress.

*For any questions, concerning this report brief
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