

# Frequently Asked Questions About the Homeless Count Report and Key Findings

## Survey Methodology

- 1. Provide more information on sampling methodology.** *More detail about the methodology for Alameda County's Homeless Count and Survey is on Page 5 and 6 of the Alameda Countywide 2011 Homeless Count and Survey Report. The Count and subpopulation data is generated from three sources: the unsheltered count and subpopulation data is from a site-based survey methodology using a two-stage sample design; the sheltered count and subpopulation data is from reports in HMIS about the count of persons and households and their characteristics (subpopulation data) for shelter and transitional housing programs using HMIS, and from administrative sources asking the same data about the count of persons and households and their characteristics for shelter and transitional housing programs that do not use the countywide HMIS system. Data from every shelter and transitional housing program is included to count every person staying in one of these programs. The unsheltered persons count and data is estimated from a two stage sampling methodology.*

*In the sampling methodology, sites for the survey work are randomly selected by a statistician from among the drop in centers, homeless outreach programs, hot meal programs and food pantry programs in the County. The list of possible sites was divided into six regions within the county and sites for the survey were selected to ensure the inclusion of one or more sites within each region of the County. The number of persons selected for interview at each site depended on the number of persons served at that site, and included all the persons served at that site during the survey time or a randomly-selected interval of service users. The two-stage sampling design and the breadth of the survey data allows statisticians and researchers to reliably estimate the number of homeless people in the county and of selected subpopulations within the homeless population.*

- 2. Was methodology same as past years?** *Yes, this is the same methodology used in Alameda County in 2009 and in every biennial count beginning in 2003. The survey-based methodology is found to be the most comprehensive tool for both enumeration and survey administration as is necessary for federal reporting and local planning. Extensive data scrubbing of the survey set was accompanied by detailed rigor assuring the accuracy of the sheltered count and subpopulation data. For HMIS-using shelters and transitional housing programs, the agencies conducted data cleaning, running reports and correcting client files identified with missing or inaccurate information, as well as validating all sheltered data count reports extracted from HMIS.*
- 3. Where did the count take place? Where did they go to interview clients?** *Surveys were conducted at twenty-five sites throughout the county. Persons using services at those programs were asked to participate in the survey. Once they agree to participate and received services from the program, trained interviewers administer the survey on site at the program.*
- 4. How were the questions asked?** *The survey instrument is constructed using culturally-sensitive, nationally-tested and recognized question sets. The instrument contains the specific wording to be read aloud introducing the survey and for every question, answer choice, and closing remarks. Each interviewer was trained and received practice and guidance administering the survey instrument in a professional, neutral, and standardized manner.*
- 5. How are "hidden homeless" defined?** *The Report cites two categories of homelessness "hidden homeless" and "homeless". "Homeless" refers to the literally homeless per the federal definition by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and includes those residing in a shelter, transitional housing program, or a hotel/motel paid for by a service provider, or are*

*unsheltered residing in vehicles, on the streets, abandoned buildings, and any other place not meant for human habitation. "Hidden Homeless" are those living temporarily with friends or family, staying in hotel or motels with their own income, or about to be evicted within seven days.*

- 6. Were the hidden homeless counted in 2011? If not, why?** *The hidden homeless were not counted in the 2011 Homeless Count. The hidden homeless were referenced in the 2011 report because they were counted in 2009 and were anticipated to influence the literally homeless count in 2011. The hidden homeless were counted in 2003, and again in 2009. The community is not required to count hidden homeless for national reporting. Conducting a count of the hidden homeless adds a great deal of cost and time to the analysis, which the community has decided to do every third count, to provide the data we need for understanding trends, planning prevention and other service programs, and investing resources.*
- 7. How was mental health information obtained from the survey respondents?** *In the 2011 report, severe mental illness was obtained by self-report. In Alameda County's 2003 Homeless Count and Survey, mental illness was obtained by both a nationally-used assessment tool and by self report. In 2003 the assessment rates and self-report rates were virtually identical to each other leading to the decision to reduce the length of the survey and rely on self-reports in subsequent counts.*
- 8. Please describe a little more about what went into the fieldwork.** *While this Count focused on meeting the federal reporting requirements for an enumeration and subpopulation data for the homeless, a great deal of oversight, planning, training and quality control went into the fieldwork, data analysis, and generation of the final data. Almost 2000 people were selected for an interview at 25 sites throughout the county on January 25, 2011. Interviewers and site coordinators received training on their role, the purpose of the project, and how to methodically carry out the interview process and the fieldwork. Over 130 trained interviewers and site coordinators worked throughout the county at the 25 service sites, many covering multiple sites during the 16 hours of fieldwork from early breakfast programs to late night outreach programs.*
- 9. How are persons coming out of jails accounted for?** *Each interviewed person was categorized as homeless based on where s/he stayed on the night of January 24, 2011. Persons residing in jails, medical institutions, a permanent housing program, or in permanent housing are disallowed from being counted as homeless.*

## **Results**

- 10. What definitions were added or changed by HUD for this count?** *No definitions were changed for this count, however, HUD did add a new subpopulation category to the 2011 Count, chronically homeless families. A chronically homeless family is all persons in a family that is unsheltered or residing in a shelter where at least one adult member (18 years of age or older) has a disabling condition and has either been continuously homeless for a year or more or has had at least three episodes of homelessness in the last four years.*
- 11. Did definition changes from HUD impact the results for chronic homeless numbers?** *No, the new chronically homeless families category is completely distinct from the number of chronically homeless individuals. Where trend data is presented for chronic homelessness (page 17 of the Report and in the Key Findings and Policy Implications), the data is for chronically homeless*

individuals and labeled as such in the documents. No comparison data is presented for chronically homeless persons in families since this is the first year such data was captured.

- 12. How can we project from a one day point-in-time survey to draw conclusions on homelessness in the County as a whole?** *One day point-in-time data is one useful lens to examine our system of care, particularly in conjunction with outcomes and cost data. One day point-in-time data is helpful to compare to the shelter and transitional housing bed and service unit capacity in the system, to monitor increases or decreases in the number of people and households that are homeless as well as the increases or decreases in the prevalence of subpopulations, and to monitor the impact of large scale interventions on the overall homeless population. With this data, the community can consider implementing shifts in capacity or target populations, repurposing programs, creating specific outreach interventions, lobbying for additional investment in programs and services for populations showing increased prevalence, and documenting the impact of the system of care as a whole.*
- 13. What is the total number of people entering and leaving homelessness?** *The number of people entering and leaving homelessness is not asked, answered, or analyzed as part of this point-in-time homeless count and is not a required data point by HUD. The HEARTH act will require the capture and reporting of reducing the number of people who become homeless, but the regulations are not yet available that describe what specific indicators will be used and whether that data point is to be captured in the Homeless Count or with HMIS data. The number of people entering and leaving homelessness are data points that could be generated from the countywide HMIS system.*
- 14. What does the “confidence interval” mean and how does it impact our ability to believe in the accuracy of the data?** *The confidence interval is a formal research convention to define the estimated range of values that is likely to include the actual “true” answer being sought, in other words, a range of the lowest and highest estimates number that includes the true answer. A common, rigorous confidence interval is 95%, meaning that the probability that the true answer being researched is 95% likely to be in the range between the lower bound and upper bound estimate of the confidence interval. Generally, a data set with few respondents having a specific trait or characteristic produces a wide confidence interval for the estimation of that trait or characteristic. The number used in the report for the estimate is the midpoint between the lower bound estimate and upper bound estimate of the confidence interval. Using this high research standard of a 95% confidence interval, the Homeless Count data is very reliable and allows one to trust in its accuracy.*
- 15. How much reliability can we have about the downward trend (given the versatility of the confidence intervals on pg 28)?** *The downward trend from 2007 to the present is both very reliable (meeting the rigors of an academic research study) and statistically significant (not likely to have happened by random chance or coincidence). The 2011 count of 4,178 homeless persons is not statistically distinguishable from the 2009 count of 4,341 (page 3 of the Report). However, the downward trend from 2007 to 2011 is tested to be statistically significant. Every Homeless Count conducted in Alameda County has consistently utilized a 95% confidence interval to allow for equitable and reliable comparison over time for the overall count as well as for the subpopulation data. A 95% confidence interval is a very high standard that promotes reliability in the data even if the confidence interval for some data points may have a wider range than others. Studies similar to this where a group of people are asked broad questions (like housing situations) and then asked more specific questions (like HIV/AIDS) often produce a wide confidence interval for the specific questions that are not a widely prevalent trait or characteristic in the overall population. The two*

protocols that give us reliability in the data are the confidence interval being set at 95% and the consistency of the 95% confidence interval throughout all of the Homeless Counts in the county.

- 16. What was the actual numerical decline in the overall count, not the percentage decline?** Pages 3 and 4 show the actual number of homeless people in the 2007, 2009, and 2011 Counts. Subtracting the number of homeless in different counts yields the actual number of persons who are no longer homeless from which the percentages are calculated. From 2007 to 2011, 660 fewer people are homeless. From 2009 to 2011, 163 fewer people are homeless.
- 17. How could the number of unsheltered adults go up so much and the overall count go down?** Looking at the change in the number of persons in each homeless living situation category is helpful to understanding how one subpopulation goes up so much while the overall population decreases. Table 11 on Page 14 of the Report shows the number and percentage change for sheltered and unsheltered persons and all homeless people. The reduction of 412 sheltered persons is higher than the increase of 249 unsheltered people which then resulted in a net reduction of 163 people for the overall homeless count. Table 14 on page 16 of the Report provides detail about the 249 person increase of unsheltered persons by household type.
- 18. Regarding the lower overall count and the increase in the number of unsheltered people, does this reflect lost capacity, a mismatch of what's offered to what's needed, or empty beds?** With the overall count, essentially non-statistically distinguishable from the 2009 overall count, the increase of unsheltered is a point worthy of further consideration and will remain a focus of EveryOne Home. Although the Homeless Count Survey and Report does not include research about the causes of the change in unsheltered populations, there is some information available that can help to give more context while EveryOne Home continues to monitor and understand these trends between sheltered and unsheltered. There does not appear to be a single factor that may explain the rise of unsheltered persons, but perhaps several factors the each may or may not have contributed. There was some emergency and transitional housing capacity lost as some transitional housing programs converted to permanent supportive housing, programs went out of business (e.g. BOSS' Oakland Homeless Project), or converted their target population and services to residential services for dually diagnosed, clean and sober living programs, or other special non-homeless populations. These programs were removed from the community's housing inventory and caused some reduction in the sheltered homeless persons. At least one other shelter added capacity, offsetting some of the reduction of beds. Occupancy on the night of January 24<sup>th</sup> fluctuated greatly among programs, ranging from 25% to 108%. However, on the whole, occupancy was below local standards but not drastically so. Overall countywide bed occupancy was 84%, with shelters at 82% and transitional housing programs at 85%. In 2009, overall bed occupancy was 88%, with shelters at 90% and transitional housing at 87%. In a couple of programs, the unit capacity was 100% while the bed capacity was less than 85%. The statistically significant increase of unsheltered persons in Alameda County will be a topic of community conversation in the next several months as we discuss and monitor occupancy through the countywide outcomes and consider the match of shelter and transitional housing programs' populations to the unsheltered need in the county.
- 19. Is the jurisdictional or regional data available? If not, how come?** Jurisdictional and regional data is not available in the 2011 Homeless Count report. Analysis and production of regional data multiplies the cost of preparing countywide data by 2.5 to 3 times. The community has decided to produce a more comprehensive count every third count for hidden homeless data and other expanded data such as regional data or special data points as budget allows. Regional data is

available in the 2009 Homeless Count Report (downloadable at [www.everyonehome.org](http://www.everyonehome.org)). Regional demographic data is also periodically produced by the InHOUSE staff.

**20. Page ii of the Key Findings & Policy Implications states unsheltered families are down 67% from 72 families in 2009 to only 24 in 2011. This seems too low. Please explain.** *The same finding is also found on Page 11 of the Report. While 24 homeless unsheltered families with children may seem low, extensive resources have been invested in homeless families with children in the last two years, specifically the Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing program and the federal Family Options study. This downward trend is a continuance of the trend of decreased number of unsheltered homeless families with children that has occurred in every count since 2005, showing a decrease in 2007, 2009, and again in 2011. The 2009 Homeless Count data also gives some insight into the 2011 finding; page 32, Table 3-6 shows that 22.2% of the unsheltered population has minor children that are not with the respondent. Many parents are able to secure some form of temporary housing for their children even if they themselves can not stay there, or may have their children removed from their custody. Many homeless families with minor children are exhaustively resourceful with any and all temporary housing opportunities so that residing on the streets or in a vehicle or other place not meant for habitation is an infrequent last resort.*

### **Subpopulation Results**

**21. Why is there an increase in substance abusing homeless adults?** *The survey instrument used for the Homeless Count did not include questions to help understand why there is an increase in substance abuse among homeless adults. As EveryOne began to think through what influenced an increase in chronic substance abusers, we learned the increase coincides with a \$4.5 million reduction of state funding for alcohol and drug services in Alameda County over the past two years (page iv of the Key Findings & Policy Implications).*

**22. Is the HIV/AIDS population rising? If so, why?** *The prevalence of HIV in the homeless population is not rising, as stated on report on page 20. The number of people with HIV/AIDS is relatively flat (64 persons in 2009, 60 people in 2011), but what has shifted with statistical significance is the proportion of those with HIV/AIDS who are unsheltered – now 70% of the homeless people with HIV/AIDS – compared to 2009 when the distribution was reversed (61% were sheltered).*

**23. Is there more detail about the chronically homeless and age?** *All the analyzed data is contained in the Alameda Countywide Homeless Count & Survey Report authored by Focus Strategies. However, we do have the data set so that if the community desires and EveryOne Home obtains the expertise, some further analysis could be done.*

### **Implications**

**24. How do numbers compare to national data?** *No national data is yet available for 2011. National data from the January 2010 Homeless Counts was aggregated and released in April 2011 and showed the number of homeless were essentially unchanged between 2009 and 2010 (a one percent increase). It also showed a three percent increase in the number of unsheltered homeless people and a one percent decline in chronically homeless individuals.*

(Sources: <http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/3908> and [http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/press/press\\_releases\\_media\\_advisories/2011/HUDNo.11-121](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/press/press_releases_media_advisories/2011/HUDNo.11-121))

- 25. How do decreases relate to overall population trends (i.e. are low-income people leaving Bay Area)?** *No additional data analysis has yet been done to compare the 2011 homeless count trends to other population trends. EveryOne Home did attempt to compare its 2011 Homeless Count data to the 2011 Homeless Count data from other Bay Area jurisdictions, however only San Mateo had its 2011 Count data publicly available prior to the release of Alameda County's.*
- 26. What contributed to the overall fall in numbers?** *The Key Findings and Policy Implications section of the Report describes the factors EveryOne Home has identified what may have contributed to the changes in the population between 2009 and 2011. Not all changes have an apparent context to understand the change and will be monitored over the next two years. The likely contributors to the overall decrease in the number of homeless persons is the Priority Home Partnership and the other housing programs such as the Family Options Study (page ii), Mental Health Services Act housing programs (page iii), and Veterans Assistance Supportive Housing vouchers (page iv).*
- 27. How can we use the data to say “where we invest, we make an impact”?** *The purpose of the Homeless Count and Survey is to generate data to enumerate the homeless population by housing type and the sub-populations with specific characteristics (e.g. veterans, people with severe mental illness). It is an anonymous study that does not identify correlation to the cause of trends. Once the data is produced, EveryOne Home begins to analyze the trends and logical reasons for the trends by examining other data in the community. EveryOne Home collected and analyzed a broad range of various data about homeless persons served, persons acquiring permanent housing, and programmatic funding data from multiple sources such as the Priority Home Partnership, the InHOUSE HMIS program, and population specific sources including the Veterans Administration and Behavioral Health Care Services. By viewing these various factual data points in context to each other and validating it with other parts of the system of care, EveryOne Home is able to posit how recent activities undertaken within the local system of care may have contributed to the results of the Count (page i of the Key Findings and Policy Implications).*
- 28. Can the Homeless Count show the linkage of a trend to a specific program design, like Priority Home Partnership & Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) funding), to show specific impact?** *No, the Homeless Count can not show correlation of the trend to a specific program intervention. Such correlative studies are extensive in their implementation and data analysis. Another way to uncover the specific impact of those two program models mentioned is evaluative studies of the Priority Home Partnership and MHSA-funded programs. Outcomes data is collected for MHSA programs is periodically analyzed and released at the State level, and a fuller scale formal evaluation is in the works. Further, Priority Home Partnership values and conducts studies of its design and data to insure its program design and investment of resources truly is impactful in ending and reducing homelessness. Both of these evaluations may show characteristics of program design that are particularly impactful to successful outcomes.*
- 29. Are the declines in the number of homeless due to the services provided within the system?** *As previously stated, the Homeless Count report did not include a scope that identified the causes of a trend. However, homeless persons' move into housing is the result of many factors including their resourcefulness and innate abilities and the services offered by programs in varying proportions for*

*each homeless person. As the system of care furthers its focus on rehousing more homeless people and doing so rapidly, the services within the system are going to undergo some change, expansion, refining, and trial and error in order to improve the effectiveness of those services.*

**30. What is the difference between the Point-In-Time (PIT) and the number of homeless in the year?**

*There are generally two ways to report a count of those who are homeless: a Point-In-Time count which counts the number of people homeless on a specific date or time period and the count of people who are homeless over a one year time period. HUD requires the Homeless Count to be a Point-In-Time Count for a twenty-four hour period during the last ten days of January. Other federal reporting in the new APR, the Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR), the quarterly Pulse Reports capture a one night PIT count for the last Wednesday in January, April, July, and October using a PIT count to analyze and report the changes in the homeless population. The count of those homeless over the year is a less used framework presently, but may be used more following the HEARTH regulations that explain the required report of outcomes and community level data on an annual basis.*

**31. Is there a way to project from a one day PIT survey to draw conclusions on homelessness in the county for a whole year?**

*The Homeless Count did not generate an estimate for the number of homeless over the course of a year. Generalized estimates predict that between two and three times as many people identified in a point-in-time count are homeless over the course of the year. A new formula has been created by the Corporation for Supportive Housing to more accurately estimate the annual number of homeless using the total point-in-time count, the count of those in shelters, the average length of a shelter stay, the number of people with more than one shelter stay per year. EveryOne Home has not created the annualized estimate, but can in the future as the need arises.*

### **Uses of the Report**

**32. Overall, what do we do with the report?**

*While the primary purpose of the report is to use in federal reporting necessary for federal funding for homeless programs, the report is also useful to provide factual data for grantwriting, fundraising, understanding and describing the population trends in Alameda county, advocating for funding, and using it on a community-wide level to help with planning processes that include the allocation of resources and reorienting programs to target growing needs or better match programs to the current population and its needs.*

**33. How does the data in the report affect us?**

*In short, it points to further conversation that we need to have together. The PIT count data is an invitation to analyze how the system works and whether the capacity is best matched to the need. There are some indications that we may want to further assess and evaluate the match of the capacity and count which will allow the community to examine together if there are refinements to the system that need to be made.*

**34. How do we describe need?**

*The Key Findings and Policy Implications found on page i – v offers a great deal of language about need in this county. Examples include, we need to continue programs that assist unsheltered households with children so that we can end homelessness for children living on the streets; attention also needs to be given to the unsheltered adult households that are growing in number; entrance requirements and internal policies at residential programs like shelters and transitional housing programs should be considered so that they create access for unsheltered*

*homeless; reducing length of stays at shelters while concurrently increasing exits to permanent housing will cause more turn over in bed space that can serve unsheltered households.*

**35. What are key “talking points” from this report? What’s important to report to our local City Councils or to local non-profit boards?** *For anyone who wants an update about the number of homeless people or for city councils, boards, and commissions, the Key Findings and Policy Implications offers graphics and text for six main points about the findings of the Count:*

- 1. The 2011 Count and Survey estimates 4,178 people were homeless in Alameda County in January 24, 2011, contributing to a 13.6% reduction in the homeless population since January 2007 (page i).*
- 2. Homelessness for families with at least one child has decreased while more single adults are homeless, with single adults now comprising nearly three-fourths of the homeless population (page ii).*
- 3. Unsheltered persons has increased 13% since 2009, and now constitutes 53% of the homeless population (page ii).*
- 4. There are now 19% fewer homeless persons with severe mental illness (page iii).*
- 5. Homeless veterans declined by 13% since 2009 (page iv).*
- 6. The number of chronically homeless single individuals was up by 9% since 2009, but is still 11% lower than its high point in 2007 (page iv).*

**36. How can I drill down to more local level?** *The 2011 Homeless Count does not include data by region or jurisdiction. Past data has shown a strong correlation between where homeless service users lost their permanent housing and where they are receiving services, particularly by region of our county. Other data from HMIS can show us where people are using services.*