

Executive Summary

Introduction

On January 24th, 2019, volunteers and homeless housing providers counted 700 people as experiencing homelessness in Whatcom County during the annual Point in Time (PIT) Count. Additionally, hundreds more are known to be at risk of losing their homes and becoming homeless in Whatcom County, due to lack of economic opportunity, family break up, mental illness, addiction, and domestic violence. People released from institutional settings, including psychiatric hospitalization, treatment, and incarceration, face extremely challenging community re-entry issues and the combination of high rents and low vacancy rates have led families of all sizes to share housing units with additional families (“doubling up”). This annual report provides historical and current data from the PIT Count, along with other relevant data, which helps guide our work in reducing and ending homelessness, informs our community about the current face of homelessness locally, and provides a year by year comparison on local trends of homelessness.

The 2019 Homeless Count

This year, 40 volunteers participated in the Whatcom County Point in Time Count, which occurred on January 24th. A few observations from this years’ Count include: good location coverage even with fewer volunteers, Homeless Outreach Team again provided great support with surveying unsheltered households and those in camps, and the Lighthouse Mission providing the second highest count of surveys returned. It is important to note that two survey locations were not able to participate in the one day count: Sea Mar and Northwest Youth Services which provided a total of 34 surveys last year. Despite this, the combined efforts of so many other volunteers, tend to provide consistent coverage and even improve our reach year after year. However, as you read this report, please keep in mind that Point in Time Counts generally underestimate the number of those who are homeless because:

- A point-in-time is just a “snapshot” and may not capture all those who are cycling in and out of homelessness over the course of a year.
- It is difficult to find where all of the unsheltered people reside. It is impossible to know all the places that might provide unconventional shelter (i.e. tents, abandoned cars) for one night.
- Participation in the PIT count is voluntary and a small number of households decline to complete the survey. Our volunteers noted people declining to participate at several locations though this is largely consistent with previous years.

How many are homeless?

This year we counted:

- 700 homeless persons (a *person* may be part of a family household, or an unaccompanied individual)
- 514 homeless households (a *household* may include one or more persons)
- 294 persons reported being unsheltered

Who are the people experiencing homelessness?

The 2019 homeless population is as diverse as the larger community population with complex barriers and incredible resiliency: They are old and young, diverse in gender identification, unaccompanied individuals, and families with children. Some are residing in sheltered settings, while others are, literally, without a roof over their heads. Of those counted this year:

- 77% of homeless households included only one person

- There were 72 families with children that included 207 persons; the median¹ family size was 2 persons
- 12% of homeless households identify as Native American which is in disparate proportion to comprising 3.1% of Whatcom County residents in the last census

In terms of age and identified gender:

- Ages ranged from less than one year old to 76 years old
- Median age of all homeless persons was 37 years
- Median age of unaccompanied homeless persons was 46 years
- 47% of all homeless persons identified themselves as female

Homeless Minors and Young Adults

“Every night, thousands of homeless youth in Washington go to sleep without safety, stability, and support of a family or home” (Dept. of Commerce). Homelessness among youth may result from family problems, economic problems, and residential instability. Some youth become homeless with their families; others leave home after years of physical and/or sexual abuse, strained relationships, neglect, addiction of a family member, or their own substance use disorder. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTBQ) youth experience significantly higher rates of homelessness than their non-LGBTBQ peers. The following statistics are for youth we encountered in 2019 who are literally homeless².

- 126 persons under 18 years old were counted, or 18% of all homeless persons
- 13% of all homeless persons were 10 years old or less
- 33 persons counted were 16 to 21 years old
- 64 persons were 16 to 24 years old
- 7 homeless minors (age 13-17) were unaccompanied

This year, we also conducted a special count of homeless youth that included minors and young adults ages 18 to 24 who were either literally homeless or unstably housed (e.g. couch surfing with friends or relatives to prevent becoming literally homeless). This special youth count was conducted at the same time as the larger count. In this special count we encountered:

- 42 youth households
- 7 unaccompanied minors (all staying in emergency shelter)
- 8 young adult families with children
- 17% of young adult households were unsheltered
- 54% of youth had a self-reported mental health disability
- 27% of youth identify as LGBTBQ

Community Re-Entry from Institutions

Homeless Count survey respondents were asked if they had been discharged from an institution within the last six months. 85 (17%) household respondents said they had been released from jail or prison, inpatient substance use disorder treatment, and or mental health treatment in the last six months.

- 17% of household respondents had been released from jail or prison (n=60)
- 4% had been released from inpatient substance use disorder treatment (n=22)

¹ The median value is, essentially, the midpoint. Specifically, in a group of measurements (e.g. family size, age) arranged from lowest to highest, the median is the middle value if the number of measurements is odd. If the number of measurements is even, the median is the average of the two middle values.

² Literally homeless means people who are staying unsheltered, in emergency shelter, or in homeless transitional housing

- 5% had been released from a psychiatric hospital (n=23)

Shelter

Homeless survey respondent households told us where they had slept the previous night:

- 19% in transitional housing (n=97)
- 36% in emergency shelter³ (n=183)
- 28% out of doors (n=145)
- 13% in a vehicle (n=67)
- 3% in a RV/boat lacking basic amenities (n=15)
- 1% in an abandoned building (n=7)

Chronic Homelessness

Based on HUD's definition of chronic homelessness, **165 unaccompanied persons** reported information indicating they were experiencing chronic homelessness. Our Homeless Outreach Team was again invaluable in obtaining this information; however, many survey respondents did not supply enough information to determine whether or not they met all of the HUD chronic homelessness characteristics. Nevertheless, it is a slight increase from our baseline year of 2008 when 158 people experiencing chronic homelessness were counted.⁴ To be considered chronically homeless based on HUD's definition, a person must be an unaccompanied individual who has been homeless for 12 months or more OR has had four or more episodes of homelessness in the last three years AND those episodes must total 12 months, AND has been sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation OR in emergency shelter, AND has one of the following disabling conditions (mental disorder, substance use disorder, permanent physical or developmental disability). The longer people live on the streets, the worse their health becomes over time leading to chronic homelessness.

The number (and percent) of 514 counted households with any of the HUD characteristics of chronic homelessness include:

- 394 (77%) unaccompanied, single individuals
- 211 (41%) who had been homeless for 12 months or more
- 154 (30%) who have had four or more episodes of homelessness in the last three years AND those episodes total at least 12 months
- 361 (70%) households including a person with a disabling condition
- 234 (46%) who slept in a place not meant for human habitation or in emergency shelter

Homeless Housing System

While it is beyond the scope of a Point in Time Count Report to comprehensively cover the robust and coordinated homeless housing system in Whatcom County, the following are important statistics for families who received a housing intervention in 2018 and who would have been otherwise homeless. The following families would have been homeless but for the rental assistance and supportive services our community undertakes with our crisis response housing system operated through coordinated entry:

- 1,304 households received housing assistance through the Whatcom Homeless Service Center and its partners
- 314 households received assistance to prevent an eviction, thus avoiding likely homelessness

³ Emergency shelter includes 15 households who stayed in a motel using an emergency assistance voucher.

⁴ Due to a counting error in 2008, the published report that year reported that only 113 persons were considered to be chronically homeless by HUD's definition; however, only unsheltered persons were included in that calculation. Instead, we should have also included persons in emergency shelter who also meet the other criteria. The correct number of chronically homeless persons in 2008 is actually 158.

- 319 households were sheltered with emergency assistance (e.g. family receiving a motel voucher), frequently as a bridge to a more permanent housing situation. (this does not include those households staying at the Lighthouse Mission or Lummi emergency shelters)
- All told, at least 2,859 individuals were assisted in 2018 with shelter and/or housing

Without the efforts of partner agencies and the resources from our local, state, and federal funders, these households would also face homelessness. Partners include: Bellingham Housing Authority, Catholic Community Services, DVSAS, Interfaith Coalition, Lake Whatcom Treatment Center, Lighthouse Mission Ministries, Lydia Place, Northwest Youth Services, Opportunity Council, Pioneer Human Services, Sun Community Services, and the YWCA.

Key Findings

Compared to the baseline year of 2008 when our community began implementing the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness, the number of people counted in 2019 that were literally homeless⁵ decreased by 18%. Our community welcomed the opening of our newest Supportive Housing project late in 2018, 22 North, which created 36 homes for Chronically Homeless youth and adults. Foundational Community Supports, a Medicaid reimbursed service that provides supportive housing and employment case management, was another positive development in 2018 helping house 20 individuals in scattered-site apartments.

However, other findings from this years' data are more troubling. The proportion of individuals 55 or older is now 17% of the total homeless count (or 26% of unaccompanied individuals), highlighting the disparate impact of rising rents on seniors in our community. The number of families with children also increased modestly from 68 to 72, eroding some of the gains made with this group. Since our baseline year of 2008, there has been a 29% reduction in the number of homeless families with children. This is the second year we have highlighted the disparities in who experiences homelessness: Native Americans represent slightly more than 3% of the total population of Whatcom County, but are 12% of the persons counted as homeless.

More than 2,281 individuals were re-housed or received assistance to prevent them from becoming homeless in 2018. The partners of Coordinated Entry, together with Whatcom County and the City of Bellingham, help an amazing amount of people. It is hard to imagine the streets of Whatcom County filled with 2,200 more people experiencing homelessness but without the investments we have made thus far, that would be a likely reality. Assisting 700 more individuals to get into permanent housing is an attainable goal with the necessary additional resources. The need for deeper investments in affordable housing, and the lack of that housing now, directly contributes to homelessness. In fact, the Washington State Department of Commerce has reported that in Washington State, a \$100 increase in rent is associated with a 14% increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness. (Journal of Urban Affairs, New Perspectives on Community-Level Determinants of Homelessness, 2012)

This is the seventh year we can report the proportion of people we encountered who were also encountered in previous homeless counts. Altogether, 22% of the homeless households we encountered in 2019 were also encountered in 2018; 12% were also encountered in 2017, 7% were also encountered in 2016; 5% were also encountered in 2015; 3% were also encountered in 2014, 3% were also encountered in 2013 and 3% were also encountered in 2012. In other words, 7% of homeless households encountered in 2016 have been continuously homeless for at least three years, OR, they have been housed and become homeless again during that time interval (see table on page 28).

⁵ Literally homeless means people who are staying unsheltered, in emergency shelter, or in homeless transitional housing

Acknowledgments

Counting people who are experiencing homelessness for the annual Point-in-Time Count is not an easy task. Successful PIT Counts in Whatcom County are made possible because of the commitment from the service organizations, community volunteers, and members of the Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness.

This year was no exception; a great number of individuals and organizations assisted with the 2019 PIT count.

Thank you to all of you who gave your time and effort.

Finally, we would like to extend a special thank you to the individuals and families who responded to this year's PIT Count survey. We understand that we are asking you some difficult questions and to share a part of your very personal story. Without this information, we would know very little about the complexities of homelessness, or how we, as a community, should respond. Your assistance can help us perform better at our work in ending homelessness in Whatcom County.