The Challenges We Must Face Together: Findings and Implications from Recent Reports and Data

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Data does not tell the whole story of homelessness in America, and at times it can seem to obscure the very real and painful crises that our neighbors are experiencing—crises that they are experiencing as unique individuals and families, with their own very specific strengths and challenges. But, recent data does tell us important information about the scale of those crises and the nature of those challenges—and a focus on data must remain central within decisions we make for crafting effective strategies, for sustaining interagency and intergovernmental efforts, and for assessing the impact of our efforts.

The more we can think about and analyze data in complementary ways the more it can tell us about the challenges ahead of us. At USICH, as we consider data regarding the number of people experiencing homelessness, housing crises, and instability, we find essential information from many different sources, including these recent reports:

- Part 1 of HUD's 2017 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR)
- Part 2 of HUD's 2016 AHAR
- Federal Data Summary School Years 2013-2014 to 2015-16: Education for Homeless Children and Youth
- Worst Case Housing Needs: 2017 Report to Congress
- Voices of Youth Count's Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America

Point-in-Time (PIT) Count Data

HUD released the 2017 PIT count data in December, based upon information gathered by communities across the country in January 2017. Such data provides us with a snapshot of the estimated number and demographics of people who are experiencing homelessness at a given point of time, and helps us assess the impact of our strategic activities and the programs that we are implementing up until that point. But it is important to treat this data as estimates and recognize that the PIT data is a bit of a blunt instrument when it comes to understanding the details of what's happening on the ground in different places.

The estimates provided by the 2017 PIT indicate there was continued progress in many parts of the country, but indicates stalled progress or significant increases in some communities. Further, the data documents important progress in ending homelessness for families with children, but stalled progress for Veterans, and significant increases for people with disabilities who are experiencing chronic homelessness. These results appear to have been impacted significantly by limited supply and increasing rents in many large urban areas across the country. Key data points include:

- **Overall Homelessness:** The estimate of the total number of people experiencing homelessness on a single night was 553,742 people. This represented an increase for the first time in seven years—up a little less than 1% (or 3,814 people)—after declining 14% between 2010 and 2016. Cumulatively, this amounts to a reduction of more than 83,300 people, or 13%, since 2010. The increase in total homelessness is the result of increases in homelessness among people in households without children, as the 2017 PIT data documents continued reductions in the number of families with children experiencing homelessness.

- **Unsheltered Homelessness:** The increase in overall homelessness is driven entirely by a 9% increase in unsheltered homelessness between 2016 and 2017, representing an additional 16,518 people. Of the nearly 554,000 people estimated to be experiencing homelessness through these PIT counts, most (65%) were staying in residential programs for people experiencing homelessness, and 35% were found in unsheltered locations. This data indicates that unsheltered homelessness has decreased by 17% (40,659 people) between 2010 and 2017, but now reflects two straight years of increases after five years of decreases. This increase is accounted for by increases among people in households without children—the estimated number of unsheltered people in families with children decreased by 12% (or 2,215 people) between 2016 and 2017.

- **Family Homelessness:** People in families with children (184,661 people) represent one-third of the total number of people experiencing homelessness—and 59% of people experiencing homelessness in families are children under the age of 18 (109,719 children.) The number of family households experiencing homelessness (57,971 households) was reduced by 5% (or 3,294 households) between 2016 and 2017, contributing to an encouraging 27% reduction between 2010 and 2017.

- **Individual Homelessness:** The PIT data estimates that more than two in three people experiencing homelessness were in households without children, and are referred to in the data as "individuals" (369,081 people.) The data shows a 4% increase in the number of individuals experiencing homelessness between the 2016 and 2017 counts (13,869 more individuals), driven entirely by a 12% rise in the number of unsheltered individuals. This increase follows a reduction of approximately 1% in the number of individuals reported as experiencing homelessness between 2015 and 2016, and results in a 7% decrease between 2010 and 2017 (26,059 fewer individuals).

- **Veteran Homelessness:** Estimated homelessness among Veterans increased slightly in the 2017 PIT data, by 1.5% (585 Veterans), and including an 18% in the number of unsheltered Veterans counted. This increase stalled the 47% reduction in Veteran homelessness between 2010 and 2016, reducing the progress to a still substantial 46% between 2010 and 2017, and a 50% reduction in unsheltered Veterans experiencing homelessness. This small increase at the national level was entirely driven by significant increases in a small number of high-cost rental markets that more than cancelled out progress being made in many other communities.

- **Chronic Homelessness:** The PIT data estimates that the number of individuals with disabilities estimated to be experiencing chronic homelessness (86,972 people) went up by 12% (or 9,476 individuals), after declining 27% between 2010 and 2016. Cumulatively, this amounts to a reduction of 19,100 people with disabilities, or 18%, since 2010. The increase between 2016 and 2017 appears to be both driven by worsening conditions and by efforts in many communities to more accurately determine which people meet the definition of chronic homelessness.

- **Youth and Young Adult Homelessness:** The 2017 PIT data estimates there were 40,799 unaccompanied youth under the age of 25 experiencing homelessness. In addition, there were 9,436 parents and 12,152 children in families in which the parent was a youth. Recognizing that communities have been working hard to improve their approaches to counting youth, supported by federal guidance and technical assistance over the last few years to strengthen their counts, federal agencies will be using the 2017 PIT count as the baseline for assessing progress on youth homelessness within the PIT counts in the years ahead.

- **Local and Regional Variations:** There is a great deal of local and regional variation in the PIT data this year, with a small number of communities having a large impact on the national totals and with continued indications of progress in much of the country. Sixty percent of Continuums of Care (237 CoCs) reported that

they had reduced total homelessness, while 40% (162 CoCs) reported increases. Thirty states and the District of Columbia reported that they had reduced total homelessness, while 20 states reported increases. The increase in homelessness nationwide has been driven primarily by increases in unsheltered homelessness among individuals in some communities, especially along the west coast, that are facing significant challenges within their rental markets. For example, if we remove the data from just a few high cost/low vacancy rental markets that reported large increases, the rest of the country reported an estimated 3% reduction in total homelessness, a 7% reduction in homelessness among families with children, a 6% reduction in homelessness among Veterans, and a smaller increase of 4% in chronic homelessness.

Other Essential Sources of Data

At USICH, we know that while the estimates that we can draw from this PIT data are vitally important, they are not the only data that we need to consider—and communities should use all of the data that they can access to tailor and drive local solutions. We also need to consider sources of annualized data that help us better understand the full scope and experience of homelessness, housing crises, and housing instability in our country over the course of a year. Such data is critical to understanding the level of need in our communities and the resources necessary to assist every individual and family who experiences housing instability, a crisis, and/or homelessness.

American Housing Survey Data regarding Worst Case Housing Needs: We've discussed HUD's Worst Case Housing Needs: 2017 Report to Congress, released in August 2017, in more detail previously in Worst Case Housing Needs Have Gotten … Worse and in Further Evidence of Worsening Affordability for Renters. Based upon the American Housing Survey conducted by the Census Bureau in 2015, this analysis found that there were 8.3 million renter households with worst-case housing needs, indicating that they: 1) have very low incomes (below 50% of the median income in their area), lack housing assistance, and have severe rent burdens (in approximately 97% of cases); 2) live in severely inadequate housing (in approximately 2% of cases); or 3) are experiencing both problems (in approximately 3% of cases). The survey data documents an 8% increase in the number of households with worst-case housing needs, representing 582,000 households.

- In total, among very low-income renter households, only about 25% had rental assistance, 43% had worst-case housing needs, and the remaining 32% avoided severe housing problems in the unassisted private rental market in 2015. The highest rate of very low-income households experiencing worst-case needs was found in the Western region of our country (50%).

- The report describes an inverse relationship between the prevalence of worst-case needs and the prevalence of housing assistance. Worst-case needs were more prevalent in the West and the South, especially in urban suburbs, where housing assistance is scarcer—although higher rents in the West were also a factor.

- For the poorest renters, growth in rental costs outpaced income gains. And despite the growing supply of rental units overall, the stock of rental housing affordable to very-low-income renters shrunk between 2013 and 2015.

- Very low-income renters faced increased competition from higher-income renters for the most affordable units. Higher income renters occupy a growing share—43%—of the most affordable units, reducing the supply of affordable units available to very low-income renters.

- There is inadequate availability of such units in all parts of the country, but there were variations in different regions of the U.S. The situation was worst in the West and South regions. For every 100 extremely low-income households in the West region, there were only 30 units that were affordable and available, and in the South region there were 39 such units. For every 100 extremely low-income households in the Midwest

region, there were 40 affordable and available units, and in the Northeast region there were 43 such units.

HUD's Annualized Data from Homeless Management Information Systems Reports: Part 2 of HUD's 2016 AHAR, also released in December 2017, documented that 1.42 million people experienced homelessness in shelters at some point between October 2015 and September 2016. We've previously provided a more detailed analysis of Who Accessed Shelter or Transitional Housing in 2016, and this data indicates 1 in 226 people in the U.S. experienced sheltered homelessness at some point in 2016, and does not include people in programs targeting domestic violence victims. This represented a 4.3% decline, or 63,380 fewer people who experienced sheltered homelessness at some point during the reporting year compared to the previous year, and followed a slight 0.3% decline between 2014 and 2015.

- Within this total, an estimated 950,837 individuals (people who are not part of a family with at least one adult and one child) experienced sheltered homelessness—about 66% of the total—representing a 3.7% decrease (36,403 fewer people) between 2015 and 2016, in contrast to increases seen over previous 2 years.

- People in families with children (at least one adult and one child under age 18) comprised an estimated 481,410 (or 33.9%) of the people who experienced sheltered homelessness during the year. Of these 481,410 people, 60.8% were children under age 18, 30.2% were children under age 6, and 6.5% were infants less than a year old. These children were a part of 147,355 family households. The number of family households who used a shelter or transitional housing program at some point during the year declined by 4.6% (or 7,025 households) compared to the previous year.

- People with disabilities made up 42.9% of adults who experienced sheltered homelessness, up from 40.6% in 2015. One in 85 adults with disabilities experienced sheltered homelessness compared to 1 in 344 adults without disabilities. The representation of people with disabilities was significantly higher among individuals (47.3%) than among adults in families with children (21.9%), but rates for both populations far exceeded the representation of people with disabilities among the U.S. general population (19.6% for individuals; 8.4% for adults in families) and among people living in poverty (30.5% for individuals; 15.0% for adults in families.)

ED's Annualized Data Reported by Public Schools: For understanding the scope and scale of housing needs and homelessness among youth and families with children, we also closely consider the data gathered by schools for the U.S. Department of Education (ED) about children and youth enrolled in public schools who experience homelessness at some point during the school year, summarized in the Federal Data Summary School Years 2013-2014 to 2015-16: Education for Homeless Children and Youth report, prepared by the National Center for Homeless Education, UNC Greensboro, and released in December 2017. These data include children and youth who meet ED's definition of homelessness, including those who are living in shelters, those who are unsheltered, and students staying in motels or in homeless doubled-up arrangements. According to this data, public schools reported that 1,304,803 students identified as experiencing homelessness at some point during the 2015-2016 school year were enrolled in their districts, an increase of 4.0% since the 2013-2014 school year, when controlling for a state error in data reporting. Of those reported nationwide:

- Approximately 76% of the students were sharing the housing of other people due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; 14% were in shelters; 7% were in hotels/motels; and 3% were unsheltered.

- Between the 2013-2014 and 2015-2016 school years, the use of hotels and motels increased the most—the number of students in that situation increased by 6%. The number of unsheltered students increased by 3%. No increases were seen in the number of students using shelter or sharing the housing of other people.

- Of the 1.3 million students, approximately 111,700 (8.6% of the total homeless student population) were

identified as unaccompanied youth (experiencing homelessness on their own), up from 88,966 (6.8% of the total homeless student population) in the 2013-2014 school year.

Voices of Youth Count's Missed Opportunities Report: The [Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America](#) report, released in November 2017, describes results from a national survey assessing the prevalence of youth homelessness broadly, including being unsheltered, staying in shelters, and "couch surfing." The survey findings indicate that one in 10 young adults ages 18 to 25, and at least one in 30 adolescents ages 13 to 17, experience some form of homelessness unaccompanied by a parent or guardian over the course of a year.

- The information in this report complements the federal data sources we already have, asking and trying to answer different questions than what is provided by those data sources.

- These findings help deepen our understanding of the range of young people's experiences of homelessness and housing instability; it confirms the fluidity of those experiences—young people frequently move between different living situations, including being unsheltered, sheltered, and temporarily staying with others.

- The data also reinforces what we know about the disparities and heightened risk factors for experiences of homelessness—including the increased likelihood of homelessness among young people of color, LGBTQ youth, expectant and parenting youth, young people without high school diplomas/GEDs, young people with lower household incomes, and young people involved with the child welfare and justice systems.

Implications of this Data

This data has many implications for our continued work to prevent and end homelessness in the United States, including:

- **If we can't expand access to affordable housing opportunities in high-need areas, we won't achieve our goals.** It is not possible to draw a one-size-fits-every-community relationship between changing rental markets and homelessness trend lines, but there are clearly powerful connections between people's access to affordable housing and both their risk of homelessness and their ability to exit homelessness. We all need to be attentive to changes in affordability in rental markets—both nationally and in our own communities. While many communities are making significant progress in reducing homelessness, the increase in homelessness nationwide in the PIT count was driven primarily by increases in unsheltered homelessness among individuals in some communities, especially along the west coast, that are facing the most significant challenges within their rental markets. High costs and low vacancy rates are putting more people at risk of entering homelessness—and are making it harder and harder for people to find housing as they strive to exit homelessness. The Department of Education data and the Worst Case Housing Needs data further document that there are far too many people staying in unstable living situations, and that those numbers are increasing. The Worst Case Housing Needs data further documents the inadequate supply of rental housing available to households with very low income—and that the supply is the most inadequate in the West. We must tailor our strategies, and the scale of our solutions, to reflect such differences in needs and housing markets.

- **Expanding access to housing opportunities will require action across jurisdictions, systems, agencies, and sectors.** Addressing those challenges is not the responsibility of agencies and programs dedicated to ending homelessness alone. We all need to do everything we can to expand access to housing affordable to people who are at risk of or are experiencing homelessness, including removing local policy barriers that limit the creation of affordable housing options in the private market, prioritizing people experiencing homelessness for mainstream affordable housing resources, and investing in expanded affordable housing opportunities across all levels of government. Otherwise, our homelessness services systems will be increasingly

bottlenecked by the lack of housing in which people can afford to live—and achievement of our shared goals of ending homelessness will remain out of reach.

- **We must do more to link people experiencing unsheltered homelessness to housing and services solutions.** While some communities are documenting significant reductions in their annual Point-in-Time counts, others are faced with increasing numbers of people living unsheltered. Such communities must not only look critically at strategies to address the immediate safety and health concerns of people who are unsheltered, but must also work to develop more low-barrier pathways into housing. We'll be working with our federal partners to help communities strengthen their capacity to identify and engage people who are unsheltered and to assist them to access permanent housing solutions, including strengthening the outcomes achieved for people who enter emergency shelter.

- **Racial inequities in housing needs and homelessness are stark and clear.** While African-Americans make up only about 13% of the U.S. population, 41% of people counted in the PIT and 43% of annual shelter users were African-American. And while Native Americans make up 1.2% of the general population, they represented an estimated 3% of the people counted in the PIT data, despite the fact that very few tribal communities are included within PIT counts. Racial inequities are also found in the worst-case housing needs data. When compared to representation in the general public, that data indicates significant over-representation of: non-Hispanic Black persons, who represent approximately 13% of the total population, but 21.7% of renters experiencing worst-case housing needs; and Hispanic persons, who represent approximately 16% of the total population, but 25.3% of renters experiencing worst-case housing needs. We must do more to ensure that our housing and services strategies are not only culturally competent and achieving equitable outcomes, but also actively reducing these racial disparities. And we must strengthen our efforts to ensure that people exiting other systems with racial disparities, such as the justice system, do not fall into homelessness. USICH is committed to continuing to learn from, and share, communities efforts to tackle issues of inequity within their strategic approaches to preventing and ending homelessness.

- **No single source of data tells the whole story—and we must tailor our responses to meet a diverse range of housing needs.** These different data sources can and should be used at the community level to drive local planning and action, to drive resource investments, to strengthen the systems we need to end people's homelessness, and to address broader housing needs. When considered comprehensively and used proactively, this data can help ensure that every community responds with the right solutions at the right scale to address homelessness and housing crises among its residents—and to help people find a path to achieving their personal goals. Driving more progress toward preventing and ending homelessness will require that communities are able to mobilize a full array of interventions and opportunities—affordable housing, rapid re-housing, supportive housing, and other tailored solutions and services that can help households attain and sustain housing and help set them on a path to lasting success. To provide specific housing and services interventions to households on a day-to-day basis, however, communities also need to develop real-time information regarding everyone experiencing homelessness, like the active lists that communities have been building to achieve the criteria and benchmarks for ending Veteran and chronic homelessness.

As I've said many times, we should be inspired by the progress that we've made, but we should also recognize that the work ahead of us will be at least as hard as the work behind us for achieving our goals of preventing and ending homelessness. The data within these recent reports serve as a call to action to all of us—and help to clearly define the challenges that we must all face together.