

# Defining Homelessness

## Frequently Asked Questions



***There is an alarming rise in the numbers of people experiencing homelessness in our region. More people are at risk of eviction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Innovative solutions require increased collaboration at every level in the region. Everyone can play a role in reducing and preventing homelessness.***

*The purpose of this document is to help a diverse audience fully participate in playing a role by offering a context and a basic understanding of homelessness.*

### **What causes homelessness?**

There is not one cause of homelessness in our region, and there are many factors that can lead to a person experiencing homelessness. Loss of income, unexpected debt, a sudden illness or accident, medical conditions, and domestic violence are just a few factors that can lead to homelessness. There is no stereotypical homeless individual. Homelessness can affect people from all income levels, backgrounds, ethnicities, religions, and ages.

### **What is chronic homelessness?**

Chronic homelessness describes people who have experienced homelessness for at least a year, or repeatedly, while struggling with a disabling condition such as a serious mental illness, substance use disorder, or physical disability.

### **What is HUD?**

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) administers federal aid to local housing agencies that manage the housing for low-income residents at rents they can afford. HUD furnishes technical and professional assistance in planning, developing and managing these developments. According to the HUD.gov website, HUD's mission is to create strong, sustainable, inclusive communities and quality affordable homes for all. More information about HUD and its programs is available at [www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov) and <https://espanol.hud.gov>.



### **What is HUD's definition of homelessness?**

The HEARTH Act defines an individual or family who resided in shelter or a place not meant for human habitation and who is exiting an institution where he or she temporarily resided as "homeless." In this final rule, HUD clarifies that "shelter" means "emergency shelter" but not "transitional housing" for the purposes of qualifying as homeless under this provision. "Youth" is defined as less than 25 years of age.



### **How does the Department of Education define homelessness?**

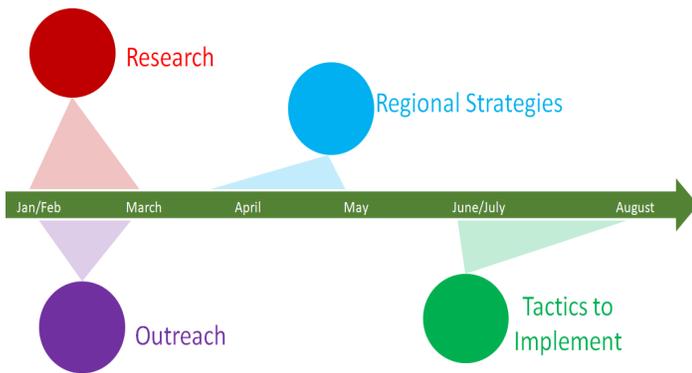
The Department of Education is focused on children experiencing homelessness. It uses the McKinney-Vento Act definition of "homeless children and youth" as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. It includes children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; who are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; who are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or who are abandoned in hospitals.

### **Homeless Managements Information System (HMIS):**

HMIS is a local information technology system used to collect client-level data and data on the provision of housing and services to homeless individuals and families and persons at risk of homelessness. Each Continuum of Care (CoC) is responsible for selecting an HMIS software solution that complies with HUD's data collection, management, and reporting standards.

## What is the Regional Collaborative on Homelessness?

The Regional Collaborative on Homelessness is a partnership among the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG), the Maricopa County Human Services Department, Arizona State University (ASU) Action Nexus, the Arizona Housing Coalition, Vitalyst Health Foundation, and Valley of the Sun United Way. The partners of the collaborative are aligning efforts in order to reduce duplication and to maximize resources in finding solutions to homelessness.



## What is the Continuum of Care?

The Continuum of Care (CoC) Program is a structure defined by HUD to promote communitywide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness. It provides funding for efforts by nonprofit providers and state and local governments to quickly rehouse homeless individuals and families while minimizing the trauma and dislocation caused to homeless individuals, families, and communities by homelessness, as well as other identified goals related to housing and supportive services.

## What Is the Maricopa Regional Continuum of Care?

The Maricopa Regional Continuum of Care works with many partners to develop regional solutions to end homelessness. Members of the Continuum of Care Board include local elected officials, service provider agencies, formerly homeless individuals, and advocates. Decisions are made by the Regional Continuum of Care Board with input from the Continuum of Care Committee.

Staffed by the Maricopa Association of Governments since 1999, the region has successfully competed well in the national application for funding. Over the years, the HUD funding award has increased and now supports more than 40 homeless assistance programs in 13 different agencies. This award has been an important and consistent source of funding for the community.

## What is MAG?

The Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) provides a forum for local governments working together on issues that affect the lives of everyone in the Greater Phoenix region. It is a regional agency that conducts planning and makes policy decisions in a number of core areas, including improving quality of life through its work in human services planning.

## What is MAG's role in homelessness solutions?

The role of MAG in regional homeless planning is to drive the development of regional strategies and actions to move people from homelessness into housing. This work includes coordinated, targeted activities with MAG member agencies, the Maricopa Regional Continuum of Care Board and related groups, regional partners, and diverse stakeholders, drawing on national and local best practices. The objective is to leverage other regional efforts and to align goals whenever possible and practical. The result will be better maximization of resources, fewer redundancies, and greater support for focused actions. The impact will be a more robust regional response that is actively supported by communities and partners across the region.



### 2020 Point-in-Time Count

The Point-in-Time (PIT) Homeless Count is an annual street and shelter count that determines the number of people experiencing homelessness in Maricopa County during a given point in time. Conducted on a single day in January, this project includes a brief survey to identify the needs and characteristics of those experiencing homelessness. Every Continuum of Care is required to submit PIT Count results to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as part of a national effort to identify the extent of homelessness across the country.

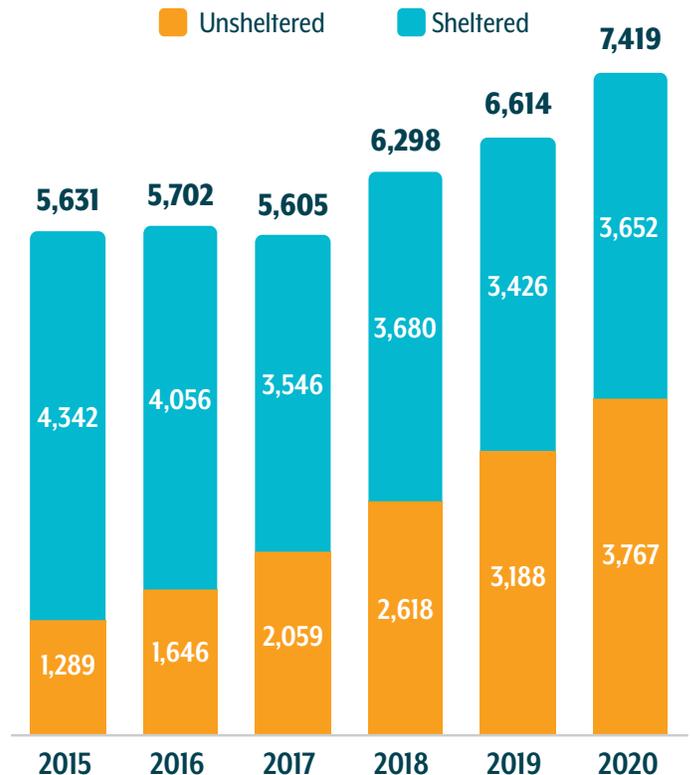
### Why is it important?

The PIT Count is an important source of data on homelessness, and is reported to Congress as part of the Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR). The PIT Count is a primary source of unsheltered homeless numbers and helps to inform communities on the number of people who do not access services such as Emergency Shelters or Transitional Housing at any given point in time. As the unsheltered count in particular continues to rise across the region, increased regional efforts to address homelessness are necessary. Potential factors that may have contributed to the increase include: improvement in PIT Count volunteer training and recruitment, change in emergency shelter capacity, and rising housing costs in the region.

The PIT Count is a one-night snapshot of homelessness that is limited by weather conditions, number and training of volunteers, self-reported survey responses, and other factors. There are more people who experience homelessness over the course of the year than on any given single night. Every year, the Continuum of Care works towards improving the count's accuracy. The Maricopa Regional Continuum of Care is committed to using data from the PIT Count and the regional Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to understand more about the population experiencing homelessness in the region and to provide solutions that will make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring.



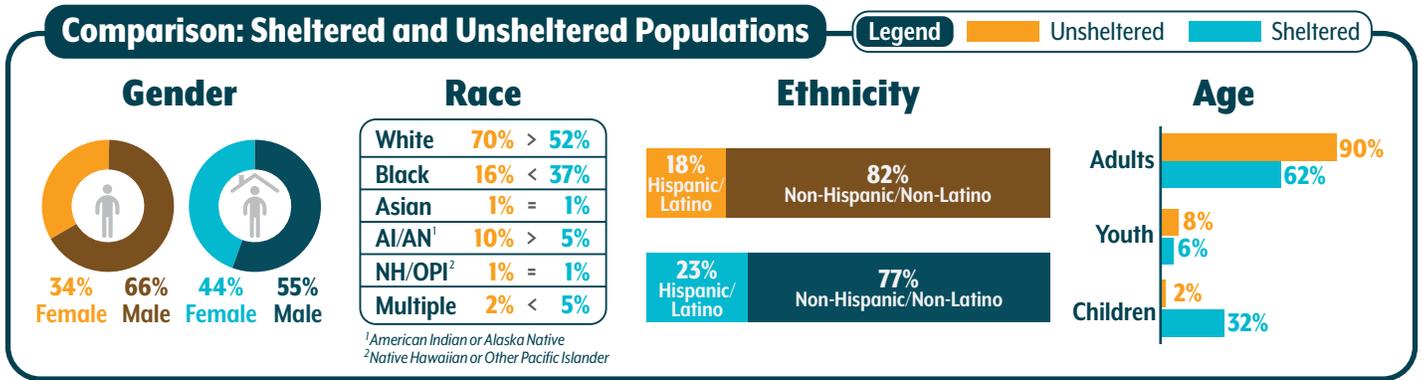
### Total PIT Count, 2015-2020



Source: Maricopa Regional Continuum of Care  
PIT Count, 2015-2020

## Who is impacted by homelessness?

From the 2020 Point-in-Time (PIT) Homeless Count:



## What are some common misconceptions of homelessness?

Taken from: *The 12 Biggest Myths about Homelessness in America* (nyu.edu)

### 1. Most are mentally ill.

Decades of epidemiological research reveals that one-third, at most, have a serious mental illness. De-institutionalization or closure of mental hospitals was initially believed to be a prime cause of homelessness, but this occurred well before the sharp increase in the 1980s.

### 2. The majority abuse drugs and alcohol.

It is believed that only about 20 to 40 percent of homeless have a substance abuse issue. In fact, abuse is rarely the sole cause of homelessness and more often is a response to it because living on the street puts the person in frequent contact with users and dealers.

### 3. They're dangerous and violent.

Homeless persons are far more likely to be the victims of violence than the perpetrators. Of course, some homeless individuals may commit acts of violence beyond self-defense but such acts rarely affect the non-homeless individuals they encounter. To put it another way, any violence by homeless persons is either self-defense or due to the rare violent perpetrator who preys on other homeless people. Non-homeless need to understand this.

### 4. "Bad choices" led to their homelessness.

Everyone makes mistakes, but the descent into homelessness is not the direct result of "choices." Far more often a sudden illness or an accident, losing one's job, or falling into debt leads to eviction — or doubling up with family or friends becomes untenable.

## Hope for People Experiencing Homelessness

*"They teach you that just because this happened to you, it doesn't define who you are. You write your own story. I think that was the biggest takeaway, they literally rebuilt you from inside out."*

— Clare, describing how Save the Family helped bring her and her three young children out of homelessness. Save the Family is one of dozens of homelessness programs funded through the Maricopa Regional Continuum of Care.

## For more information:

Contact us at [mag@azmag.gov](mailto:mag@azmag.gov) or visit:

<https://www.azmag.gov/Programs/Homelessness>



302 North First Avenue, Suite 300, Phoenix, AZ 85003