Reaching Home | Everyone Counts 2021

**Questions and Answers from the Ask Me Anything Session**

**December 3, 2020**

The following is a summary of the questions and answers from the Ask Me Anything – Everyone Counts 2021 session on December 3, 2020. The following topics were covered:

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# Reasons for proceeding with the Point-in-Time (PiT) Counts

**Q: Why are we trying to do these PiT Counts in spring 2021?**

**A:** Despite the challenges involved in conducting a PiT Count in the current environment, it is also crucial to understand how homelessness has been affected by the pandemic. Job losses, changes to government supports, desire to avoid shared living accommodations, and other factors may be having substantial impacts on homelessness in your community. The nationally-coordinated PiT Counts collect data using a methodology that allows the results of the counts to be comparable over time. As we have good data from the 2016 and 2018 counts, the 2021 counts will provide a critical 3rd data point. These data are important to contributing to a picture of homelessness in Canada, and are used to inform priorities and policy decisions across jurisdictions.

**Q: Do we have to conduct the count in the March-April window? Can we put it off until it’s warm enough to have headquarters outside?**

**A:** There are several advantages to conducting the count in the March/April window. First, as temperatures drop, more individuals experiencing homelessness typically come in to shelters. (see: <https://www.policyschool.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/weather-and-homeless-kneebone-jadidzadeh.pdf>). The higher the proportion of the population spending the night in sheltered locations due to cooler temperatures, the more confident we can be that the total enumeration is accurate. Second, it is beneficial to conduct the count around the same time of year each time for consistency, as homelessness is known to fluctuate seasonally in many places. Ultimately, though, if a March/April count isn’t possible for your community, please reach out to us at [hpsr@hrsdc-rhdcc.gc.ca](mailto:hpsr@hrsdc-rhdcc.gc.ca) to discuss alternatives.

**Q: Our community completed a semi-formal rough sleeper count this fall. We also have substantial amount of administrative data from all local shelters. Could we use this instead of moving forward on a Count in the spring?**

**A:** It would be ideal to gather data on both sheltered and unsheltered individuals on a single date within the spring count window. Combining the administrative data with an unsheltered enumeration on this same date will provide a number that will be comparable with the data from the 2018 Count. This will help us to measure the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on homelessness in Canada.

We would want to discuss how similar the methodology you used in the fall was to previous PiT Counts. If it is impossible to conduct a similar unsheltered count in the spring, please contact us to discuss how the data you have already collected can be used.

**Q: We are in a state of emergency and shelter staff is very strained. We’re cutting back to the essentials. Do we have to conduct a count?**

**A:** There is always the option to further postpone your count. However, a number of options for modifications to the traditional PiT count are available. An overview of these options were presented in the [AMA meeting slides](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/library/resources/everyone-counts-2021-ask-me-anything-presentation). More detail will be presented at the January 21 training sessions. If you are still concerned about your community’s ability to participate, please contact Reaching Home at [hpsr@hrsdc-rhdcc.gc.ca](mailto:hpsr@hrsdc-rhdcc.gc.ca) to discuss.

# Adaptations to the Methodology

**Q: What can we do to keep the count safe?**

**A:** The safety of front-line staff, volunteers, and individuals experiencing homelessness is of utmost importance... Below are some suggestions that will help reduce interactions and therefore the spread of infection. We strongly encourage communities to keep up to date on all provincial/territorial and local public health orders and guidelines, and consult with local public health authorities in planning for a safe and successful PiT Count

For the sheltered survey:

* Existing shelter staff only (no volunteers) may conduct the survey in-shelter
* Shelter staff may conduct the surveys over a longer period of time (up to 2 weeks) to alleviate stress on capacity.
* If above modifications are not sufficient, the sheltered survey can be postponed and only administrative data may be provided.

For the unsheltered survey

* Since the unsheltered survey takes place outside, communities may be able to proceed with minor adjustments, such as virtual training, sending out materials in advance (in order to avoid the need for a physical headquarters site), creating smaller survey teams, and masking
* It may help to use only “volunteers” from within the homeless-serving sector. They may already be familiar with health and safety protocols, will likely require less training, and can operate more independently than volunteers unfamiliar with this population and/or the count. The surveys may also be conducted over a longer period of time (up to 3 days) to alleviate the burden. If resources do not allow for the administration of the unsheltered survey, a basic enumeration (using the screening questions only) may be conducted.

**Q: We won’t be able to recruit volunteers. How will we conduct a count without volunteers?**

**A:** There are a number of options to modify the methodology of the count in order to reduce reliance on volunteers or eliminate the need for volunteers. For more information, please refer to slide six, [here](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/library/resources/everyone-counts-2021-ask-me-anything-presentation).

**Q: Our staff don’t have enough time to organize and conduct the count because they’ve been given extra pandemic-related work. How are we going to make this work?**

**A:** Several modifications to the traditional PiT Count methodology are available that should reduce the burden:

* Eliminating or scaling back of related events
* Lengthening the time to administer of the survey for sheltered individuals and families
* Limiting surveys to only unsheltered individuals or eliminating the survey altogether in favor of enumeration only.

These modifications should help to reduce the burden on staff and providers, while still collecting critical data on of the impact of COVID-19 on homelessness. Further information can be found [here](https://app.slack.com/client/TTLKY1VT9/CT8KDKMKK/details/shared_files) and will be described in detail at the training session on January 21.

When assessing the impact of COVID-19 on your community, you should take into account the impact on your own team and on service providers. If the sector is focused on responding to the pandemic, and you are unable to assign resources to making even a limited count happen, please reach out to us to discuss.

**Q: Is there an assessment tool that could be used to determine if a community should move forward? What is the process to have this timeline discussed?**

**A:** We are developing further resources to explain the modified methodology options. We will also be offering live online training on January 21. Materials will be shared on the [Homelessness Learning Hub](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/learning-materials/point-time-counts) and the PiT coordinator [Slack](https://join.slack.com/t/pitcount/shared_invite/zt-k7evcv5j-oCFM1WdNRIf3TsAaAEbAUQ) page following the training session.

We are unable to assess the local risk for each community and ultimately make those decisions, but we can highlight some factors to consider. The nature of the pandemic calls for contingency plans and flexibility.

1. Decide how your organization can reduce the risk and burden associated with each component of the count.
2. Review the modification table that we have provided.
3. Review the updated Guide to Point-in-Time Counts.
4. Develop rough descriptions of possible modifications for each component of your local count.
5. Then, make a list of factors that your organization will use to make decisions.
6. Keep apprised of the progression of the pandemic in your community as well as health and safety directives.
7. Reassess regularly to determine if additional adjustments are required.
8. Consult your count partners on the options and discuss how to best move forward.

If you are concerned about your ability to conduct a count 8 weeks before your scheduled date, please contact us. Aim to finalize your organization’s plan for moving forward 4-6 weeks before your count.

# Public Health Guidelines and Messaging

**Q: What if Public Health recommends that the PiT Count should not be conducted in my community?**

**A:** When consulting with public health authorities, please consider how the count can be modified to address public health concerns. These options are intended to make it possible to conduct a count in a way that complies with many public health guidelines.

If you cannot conduct your count safely, two core elements might still be possible: (1) Your CE could provide only administrative data for the night of the count for sheltered individuals, and, (2) outreach workers and other professionals that regularly work with rough sleepers (ex. If you have by-law officers or police that are trained and dedicated to working with this population) could administer only the screening questions from the survey to unsheltered individuals in your community. This approach would provide a basic enumeration with sufficiently aligned methodology to allow for comparison to past enumerations.

As well, surveys can be conducted with the same population over the following weeks. These surveys would not alter your enumeration numbers, but they would provide a wealth of information on people experiencing homelessness that will be comparable to your previous surveys.

However, **if you are unable to conduct a count due to safety concerns or human resources, please contact us at** [**hpsr@hrsdc-rhdcc.gc.ca**](mailto:hpsr@hrsdc-rhdcc.gc.ca) **to further postpone**.

**Q: How should we frame the messaging around the count for the media?**

**A:** Here are some talking points to get you started:

* It is crucial to understand how homelessness has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.
* A PiT Count is the most comprehensive approach we have right now to collecting information on the incidence of homelessness outside of the shelter system. It can shed light on changes in homelessness among people who have not yet accessed service, but who are sleeping outside, for example.
* The counts capture information about how long and how often people experience homelessness, and about the experience of homelessness among marginalized groups. The survey also asks people what led to their housing loss, including whether COVID-19 played a role.
* Data from the counts contribute to the national understanding of homelessness and how it changes over time. The last national count was in spring 2018. This count will help to update this picture.
* The results of the counts are used to identify trends and inform planning and policy decisions among various organizations and governments.

# Survey Questions

**Q: Are we using the same survey that we had ready to go earlier this year?**

**A:** We have added 2 questions to the core survey that was in place for the spring 2020 counts. The 2 new questions are about (1) racial identity and (2) effect of COVID on housing status. In addition, one more option (encampment) has been added to part C of the screening questions. These can be found in the [presentation slides from the AMA session](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/library/resources/everyone-counts-2021-ask-me-anything-presentation). They will also be discussed further at the upcoming training.

# HIFIS and Data Provision Agreement

**Q: Are the new survey questions going to be in HIFIS?**

**A:** Yes, a minor update will be released in early 2021 that will include the new questions. For those who wish to use HIFIS Lite, the new questions will be added with the new release.

**Q: I see in HIFIS you can download a Data Provision Agreement (DPA) within the PiT Count Module. From the Demo Site, nothing seems to happen when I try to download. How does this work and can you talk a bit about this document?**

**A:** Thank you for letting us know about the current issues. We will make sure to look into the demo site error and follow-up. The Data Provision Agreement (DPA) is the agreement between the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) host and Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) that outlines the requirements for data collection, privacy and security for organizations that are using HIFIS for the provision of data to ESDC. It also outlines the Government of Canada’s responsibilities and obligations related to the use and protection of data.

The HIFIS DPA has been recently updated to align with the Reaching Home objectives, and is available [online](https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/homelessness/hifis/dpa.html). These updates include:

* a stronger focus on a community-level HIFIS implementation by outlining the role of the HIFIS Lead Organization in relation to the Service Provider;
* the incorporation of Point-in-Time Count data collection, and how this data is collected through HIFIS; and,
* enabling interdepartmental collaboration on homelessness data to enhance the Government of Canada’s ability to respond to homelessness.

The updated DPA ensures that organizations continue to operate under the most up-to-date terms and conditions that continues to advance our partnership in the homelessness sector.

**Q: How does the PiT Count process ensure that information and data collected on Indigenous persons are appropriately analyzed and presented?**

**A:** There is a significant degree of flexibility in terms of how a PiT count can be carried out. If you are a non-Indigenous organization that is leading the count, it is a requirement to work together with the Indigenous community on the approach taken for the count. This includes how the data are collected, but also how they are interpreted and reported.

A number of resources are available on the Homelessness Learning Hub that provide context on the Indigenous experience of homelessness in the context of the PiT count, presentations by Indigenous communities that have led PiT counts, and from communities that have implemented counts in partnership. Some of these resources are linked below:

* [Fostering Indigenous Partnerships & Cultural Competency During your PiT Count](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/library/resources/fostering-indigenous-partnerships-cultural-competency-during-your-pit-count)
* [Engaging the Aboriginal Community](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/library/resources/engaging-aboriginal-community)
* [Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/library/resources/aboriginal-standing-committee-housing-and-homelessness)
* [Indigenizing the 2018 Toronto Street Needs Assessment](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/library/resources/indigenizing-2018-toronto-street-needs-assessment)
* [Enhanced Enumeration Tools for Indigenous Communities: Brantford PiT Count Experience](-%09https:/www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/library/resources/enhanced-enumeration-tools-indigenous-communities-brantford-pit-count-experience)

# Adjusted Timelines

**Q: How would the methodology change if we delayed the survey from the enumeration? Would the survey move to sampling strategy with different targets or would we be repeating the enumeration with a survey later on?**

**A:** Under the modified PiT count methodology, the enumeration still takes place on a single night in March or April. The surveys are administered over a longer period of time or at a later date, but they would not contribute to the enumeration. The strategy for administering the survey should be to cover the same service providers and outdoor areas that would be covered in a conventional PiT count, but they can be covered over longer periods of time. You should aim to achieve a similar number of surveys to your last count.

**Q: How will the timelines for reporting data be adjusted if we spread out survey administration over a month or two?**

**A:** Generally, the data from the Enumeration and the survey are due to ESDC six months after the count. If the administration of the survey takes place in March or April, we would ask for the survey results within six months after the survey was completed.

If you are in a community that completes the enumeration in March or April, but has to postpone the survey past April 30, please provide your enumeration through the final report template (to be provided) by six months after the enumeration takes place. Your survey data can follow within six months after the survey takes place.

# Funding

**Q: For our funding allocations for 2020-2021 and we were supposed to have our count in 2020, will there be flexibility to carry those funds into the next fiscal year?**

**A:** COVID-19 funding is intended to support the community’s response to COVID, but from an eligibility perspective, communities can use the funds for PiT counts. PiT count activities would be eligible under the “coordination of resources and data collection” section in the Directives.

For more information on the feasibility of carrying funds into the next fiscal year, please reach out to your local Service Canada representative.

# PiT Count Resources

**Q: We are new to the PiT count methodology. What resources can we start with?**

**A:** The updated Guide to Point-in-Time Counts will be available in early 2021, but the guidance in the existing version still applies. The [PiT count toolkit](https://www.homelesshub.ca/toolkit/point-time-count-toolkit) goes beyond the basics, providing advice from the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. PiT Count resources are available on the [Homelessness Learning hub.](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/learning-materials/point-time-counts)

Also, join the [Slack](https://join.slack.com/t/pitcount/shared_invite/zt-j8knwzp2-Gu0BEqDlxe6bR4AF3mXLsw) page to interact with your counterparts from other communities, and pose questions on the talk pages.

**Q: Will ESDC provide any training videos?**

**A:** Great news! HPD has produced 4 training videos (linked below), which can be found on the [Homelessness Learning Hub](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/). These videos were produced pre-pandemic. Overall, they are still largely applicable and very helpful!

* [How to Approach an Individual on the Street](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/library/resources/how-approach-individual-street-video)
* [How to Screen Someone in an Unsheltered Location](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/library/resources/how-screen-someone-unsheltered-location-video)
* [How to Perform the Survey](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/library/resources/how-perform-survey-video)
* [How to Ask the Survey Questions](https://www.homelessnesslearninghub.ca/library/resources/how-ask-survey-questions-video)