

Data That Makes A Difference

June 3, 2021

Webinar Follow-up Questions

During the webinar featuring Dr. Dan O'Flaherty on June 3, more questions were asked than there was time to address them all. Dr. O'Flaherty, with the assistance of Dr. Ron Kneebone, has graciously answered the additional questions here.

1. In the slides demonstrating the breakdown of homelessness, an attendee inquired about the breakdown by gender.

In the US in January 2020, around 62% of homeless people were men or boys, 38% were women or girls, and around 1% were transgender or non-conforming. 44% of sheltered people were women or girls, and 30% of unsheltered people were women or girls. Canadian results in Everyone Counts 2018 were similar, with 62% male, 36% female, and 2% non-binary.

2. Why not ask homeless during PiT count, if they were offered a house would they take it and why?

It's very hard to ask anything during a PiT count, since many homeless people are sleeping or busy at the time (generally about 2 am). It might also seem strange to ask such a question when one is not in any position to do anything about a positive response.

3. What's your idea on using individual level shelter data over time (administrative data) rather than using PiT to address policy questions?

Administrative data are very helpful but they don't tell us anything about unsheltered people, who are roughly half of the homeless population in Canada and the US, and a large majority on the West Coast of the US, where the greatest problems are now. The number of unsheltered people in Los Angeles County is probably greater than the total number of homeless people, sheltered or unsheltered, in Canada.

4. What are the barriers to getting good PiT data, both in Calgary and elsewhere?

The major problem is counting unsheltered people, since they have incentives to be hard to find. A secondary problem, sometimes encountered, is getting cooperation from shelters.

5. What roles do and can Civil Society organizations play in addressing homelessness issues?

Ron Kneebone: People who experience homelessness do so for a variety of reasons including poverty, health and addiction issues, domestic violence, housing discrimination, etc. Civil society organizations deal with all these issues and in so doing play important roles in addressing homelessness.

6. What can we learn when we couple PiT data with By-name lists? Can this provide greater insight on flows, particularly assuming we are tracking data on those who exit the “system” on their own?

PiT counts with by-name lists should work well in the manner you suggest.

7. Would the lack of connection between policy and PiT suggest that a better argument for HF and PSH is a client centered one – that it provides the best outcomes for the individual and best meets their needs to do other interventions?

The argument you suggest here for HF and PSH is the correct one. The RCTs were designed to test that proposition and they generally found it to be true. It's an important question. But it's not the only question. Many people are interested in another question--how to reduce the number of people who are homeless. You need PIT counts to answer that question.

8. Without PiT counts, how would we understand homelessness in people who do not access shelter? We also don't have policy in place to get Youth shelter data or DV shelter data; this would leave some big gaps.

Agreed. Learning about unsheltered people is a major reason why we need PIT counts--and also a major reason why they are hard to do. Similarly for youth and DV shelters. (Ron Kneebone: The number of people staying in DV and Youth shelters are included in PiT counts.)

9. How would you see mixed methods research as contributing to a solution?

Rich qualitative descriptions are great for thinking about a problem. But you need quantitative information to know whether the ideas from the rich description are just anecdotes. So you need both methods. But specialization is also good; so I don't see any reason why one person should combine both.