Overview of homelessness and related policy in the United States

- Homelessness in the U.S. is longstanding, but until 1987, there was no comprehensive federal law or policy supporting efforts to manage or end homelessness.

- From the pre-Colonial era to about 1980, literal homelessness (those living out-of-doors) was usually addressed on an as-needed basis by local secular and/or religious voluntary organizations. Occasionally local governments would also assist, but this official involvement was not common.

- The current homeless services system is mostly funded through the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (originally passed as the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Services Act of 1987, and most recently reauthorized in 2009 as the HEARTH Act).
  - The original McKinney Act was supposed to sunset after 3 years because it was believed that the vast increase in visible homelessness was only temporary.
  - McKinney-Vento now provides approximately $2 billion in funds to states and local agencies to grant to service providers (usually nonprofit organizations).
  - The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) manages and distributes the largest share of McKinney-Vento funds.
  - The U.S. Department of Education (DoE) distributes a significant portion of McKinney-Vento funds to publicly funded K-12 school districts to provide services to homeless students (such as transportation to and from school and additional educational assistance).
  - HUD and the DoE require communities to count their homeless populations in order to receive homeless services funding.
  - Most states, local governments, and private funders have chosen to base their homelessness policy on the definition of homelessness used by HUD.

Homeless Counts/Estimates – Why and How

- The first effort to estimate the number of homeless people nationally, by advocates Mitch Snyder and Mary Ellen Hombs in the early 1980s, was revealed to be a largely fictional number, probably intended to frame homelessness as a vast and persistent policy issue that required government intervention.

- Policymakers continue to believe that trying to find the “best” or “most complete” number of homeless people is one of the main means through which to better inform policy decisions – despite frequent and valid critiques from advocates and service providers.
The main critiques center on: erroneous assumptions about the accuracy of homeless counts, multiple and irreconcilable definitions of homelessness, and inconsistent and incomparable methodological processes and methods.

- Despite these ongoing critiques and disagreements about what homeless counts actually measure and how they are conducted, HUD has required grantees to provide a community-wide homeless population estimate, known as a Point-in-Time Count (PITC), since 2005.

- Efforts to standardize and professionalize homeless counts have produced a number of methodological approaches since Snyder and Hombs’ first estimate. The main approaches include:
  - **Key informant estimation** – this approach includes some form of sampling and getting “expert” information, mostly from service providers. Snyder and Hombs’ claimed to have used a process such as this.
  - **Partial count** – this approach usually involves some type of observational count (enumeration) and/or surveys with a convenient sample of homeless people, which is not usually representative of the overall homeless populations.
  - **Annual extrapolation from partial count** – an attempt to create an annual estimate of people experiencing homelessness from the partial count. This kind of process is problematic since a partial count is very contextual, and that context (weather conditions, service availability, etc.) does not remain constant for an entire year.
  - **Observation census** – an attempt to count every observable homeless person. This approach is clearly problematic since there is no means to guarantee that every homeless person can be observed. Too many variables can alter who can be seen, and unless a person is directly asked if they are homeless, enumerators are left to guess who they think is homeless based on personal judgment.
  - **Adaptations of standard sampling designs** – adapting existing social science research strategies to reach these mobile and difficult to identify populations. This generally means a combination of an observational enumeration and a survey. Results are still only estimates, but the survey results can sometimes be used to estimate the likely undercount in the enumeration.

- There is a long and highly contested history surrounding modern homeless count efforts. The main takeaway for policymakers and community members alike is that there is simply no way to ever achieve a “full” or “complete” count of a population that defies a singular definition and is difficult to find.

- Instead of expending outsized resources towards an impossible goal, communities should discuss what information about their homeless residents they actually need to prevent and end homelessness. While homeless counts may have some limited utility, the heavy reliance on these exceedingly flawed research tools will ultimately not serve the larger objective – ending homelessness.