



HOMELESSNESS IN INDIANAPOLIS

2021 Marion County Point-in-Time Count

BACKGROUND

For more than a decade, the IU Public Policy Institute (PPI) and the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention (CHIP) have collaborated with local organizations to conduct Marion County’s annual Point-in-Time (PIT) Count. As mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the PIT Count reports the number of people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. This policy brief highlights key findings and takeaways from the PIT Count to inform policy decisions and service provision.

METHODOLOGY

To be counted as experiencing homelessness in the annual PIT Count, an individual must meet HUD’s definition of homelessness. That includes individuals and families who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (i.e., staying in emergency shelters or places not meant for human habitation) or individuals and families fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence.

The methodology for the 2021 PIT Count changed significantly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To address safety concerns, HUD allowed Continuums of Care (CoCs)¹ nationwide to request exemptions from participating in parts of the PIT Count and amend how they administered surveys.

The Indianapolis CoC was granted an exception, allowing for significant changes to its unsheltered survey. In previous years, volunteers surveyed people in unsheltered situations on a single night. This year—to minimize health risks—

KEY FINDINGS

- There were 1,928 individuals counted in the 2021 PIT Count, the highest number in the past 10 years.
- The number of unsheltered individuals increased to 263 from a five-year low of 108 in 2019, though a change in methodology likely contributed to the increase.
- Those identifying as Black or African American continue to be disproportionately represented in the homeless population at 54%.
- Of all McKinney-Vento eligible youth, 59% were Black.
- This year marks a continued trend in the increase of individuals older than 62 experiencing homelessness.

teams comprised entirely of Professional Blended Street Outreach and Faith-Based Street Outreach staff conducted the surveys. To accommodate the reduced capacity due to a lack of volunteers, the count was expanded from a single night to a five-day period from January 18–22, 2021. Teams asked people they encountered during that time where they stayed on the night of January 18. This determined whether they were eligible for the count. The teams also used a significantly shortened survey to minimize interaction time.

The individuals encountered during the count are categorized as either sheltered, unsheltered, or other (e.g., someone staying with a friend or relative). Those who fell into the third category were not included in the PIT Count.

1 According to the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#), a Continuum of Care is a “regional or local planning body that coordinates housing and services funding for homeless families and individuals.”

This report combines data from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and from separate surveys of shelters that do not participate in the HMIS system. This combination allows researchers to count how many people lived in a sheltered situation on January 18. Sheltered locations include:

- Emergency shelters: agencies with a primary purpose of providing shelter to those experiencing homelessness.
- Transitional housing: agencies that provide shelter and support services for up to 24 months for households experiencing homelessness.
- Safe havens: temporary supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness and complex barriers (e.g., mental illness).
- Noncongregate shelters: newly established shelters for those at high-risk for COVID-19 or individuals testing positive for COVID-19. These shelters are temporary and are only expected to be active as a part of the public health response to the pandemic.

For the purposes of this report, those staying in noncongregate shelters were categorized as staying in emergency shelters.

There are limitations on inferences that can be made based on the individual numbers in this report due to the methodology changes, the addition of noncongregate shelters, and adjusted capacity at existing shelters. Instead, analysis in this report will focus on demographic information and other indicators of how individuals experience homelessness in Marion County.

DEDUPLICATION PROCESS

Shelters provided survey teams with lists of people who stayed in their locations on the night of January 18. During the team’s separate five-day field survey, they used that list to cross-reference the responses of the people they encountered to reduce potential duplication.

While duplicate observations are vetted every year, changes in methodology made deduplication a more deliberate charge in 2021. When a potential duplicate listing was found, researchers used unique client identifiers to compare listings. They then compared matching initials, dates of birth, and demographic data to ensure the observations represented the same person. When two listings matched, the one with the more robust observation was kept. This process was then repeated using only dates of birth to account for instances where three initials were collected rather than two. HMIS was consulted when researchers suspected that two observations represented one person, but the data was inconsistent. This helped determine the accuracy of observations.

Instances in which an observation did not contain sufficient information to compare for duplication were excluded from the count. Unsheltered and sheltered paper surveys that indicated a participant did not consent to participate were also excluded.

FINDINGS

OVERALL TRENDS

In 2021, there were 1,928 individuals counted in the PIT Count (Table 1). This represents a 21% increase from 2020’s count of 1,588 and the highest number counted during the past 10 years.

Both sheltered and unsheltered numbers increased from the previous year, with 1,665 individuals staying in sheltered locations and 263 being unsheltered. However, changes in methodology likely contributed to the unsheltered increase. Of those who were sheltered, 304 stayed in transitional housing and 43 were in a safe haven. This indicated a decrease in the percentage staying at both types of shelters compared to 2020.

TABLE 1. Marion County Point-in-Time Count (2017–2021)

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	CHANGE 2020–2021
Low temperature	37° F	27° F	-11° F	18° F	27° F	9° F
Sheltered	1,657	1,546	1,462	1,402	1,665	18.8%
Unsheltered	126	136	105	186	263	41.4%
Total	1,783	1,682	1,567	1,588	1,928	21.4%

FIGURE 1. Percentage of total PIT Count population by location (2020 & 2021)

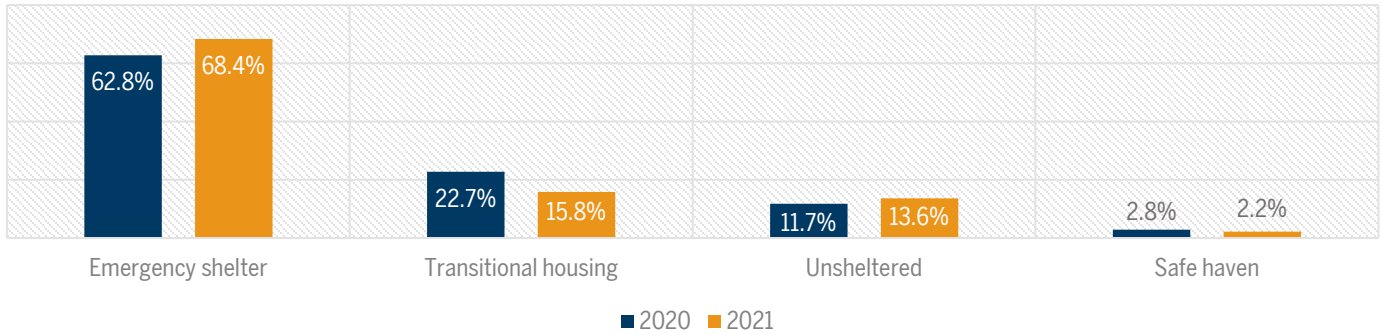


TABLE 2. Reported gender of individuals experiencing homelessness (2021)

	MALE	FEMALE	TRANSGENDER	TOTAL
Emergency shelter	846	470	2	1,318
Transitional housing	218	86	0	304
Safe haven	35	8	0	43
Unsheltered	204	57	2	263
Total	1,303	621	4	1,928

Additionally, 1,318 individuals stayed in emergency shelters in 2021. This includes 222 people who stayed in noncongregate shelters managed by the city of Indianapolis and individual hotel rooms paid for by Supportive Services for Veteran Families. Additional noncongregate shelter beds were managed by traditional emergency shelter providers. However, individuals staying in those beds were not distinguished in the data from individuals staying at traditional emergency shelter facilities. The number of people staying in transitional housing dropped from 2020, while all other locations increased or maintained their populations in 2021.

identifying as transgender or gender nonconforming. Factors such as stigma and safety concerns could affect whether an individual chooses to disclose their gender identity to outreach or shelter staff.

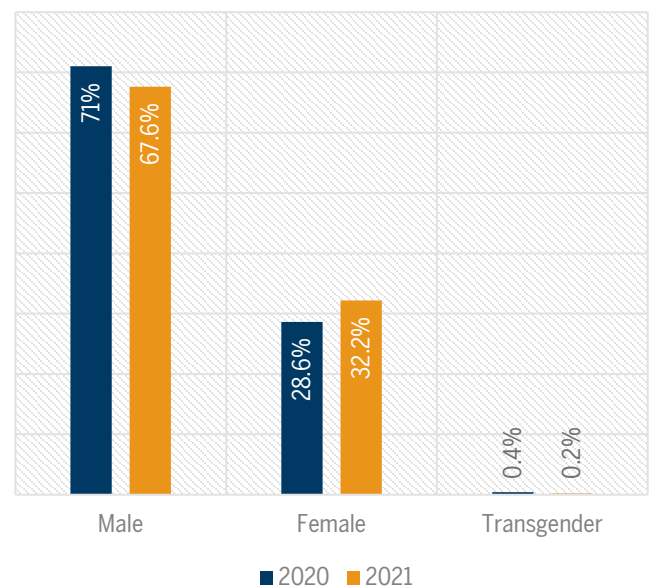
DEMOGRAPHICS

Gender

Of all individuals counted in the 2021 PIT Count, nearly 68% identified as male, 32% as female, and less than 1% as transgender (Figure 2). This is consistent with the past three years of PIT Count data.

Gender identity information was collected in a variety of ways following HUD guidance. Some of these methods could potentially lead to an undercount of individuals

FIGURE 2. Reported gender as a percentage of the PIT Count population (2020 & 2021)



Age

Individuals ages 35–61 continue to make up the largest percentage of those experiencing homelessness in Indianapolis (Figure 3). In the 2020 PIT Count, there were 176 people older than 62 experiencing homelessness, a substantial increase from 2019. In the 2021 PIT Count, there was another substantial increase in this age group, with 206 individuals counted. Following the pattern of previous years, those ages 18–24 made up the smallest portion of individuals experiencing homelessness. However, their numbers did increase from 66 in 2020 to 87 in 2021. The

number of children under the age of 18 also increased from 207 in 2020 to 277 in 2021. The children in this age group comprise about 15% of the total population experiencing homelessness in 2021.

As displayed in Figure 4, most individuals older than 62 stayed in emergency shelters and all children under 18 were in either emergency shelters or transitional housing. Those in the 35–49 age group made up the largest percentage of unsheltered homelessness.

FIGURE 3. Count of reported age of individuals experiencing homelessness (2016–2021)

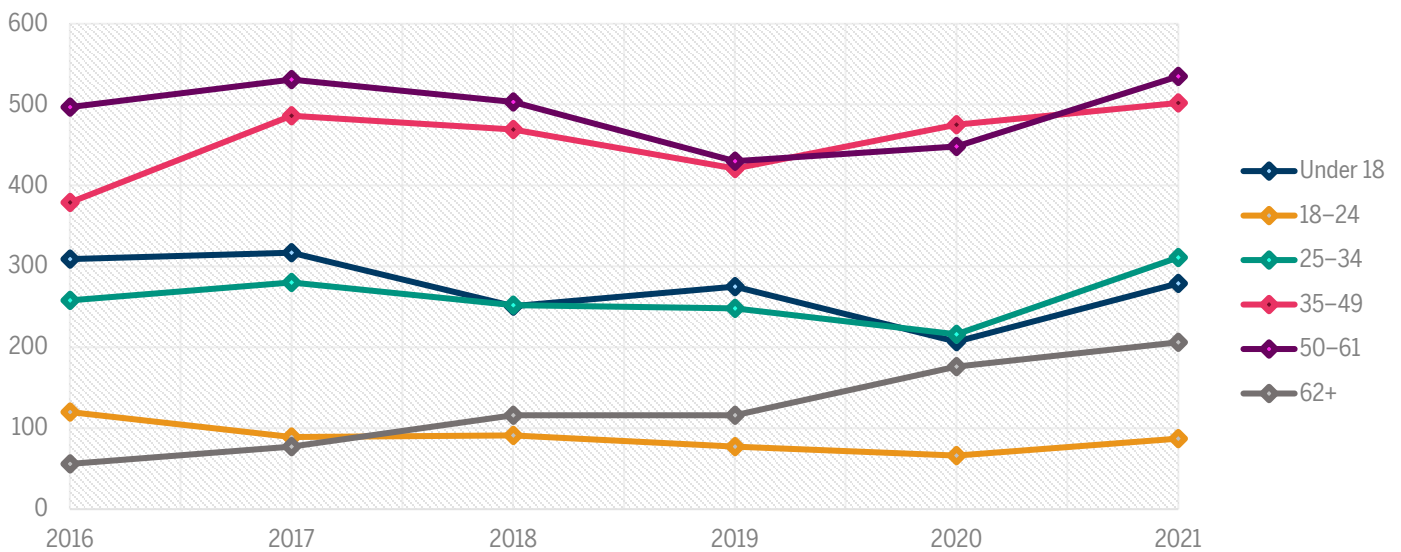
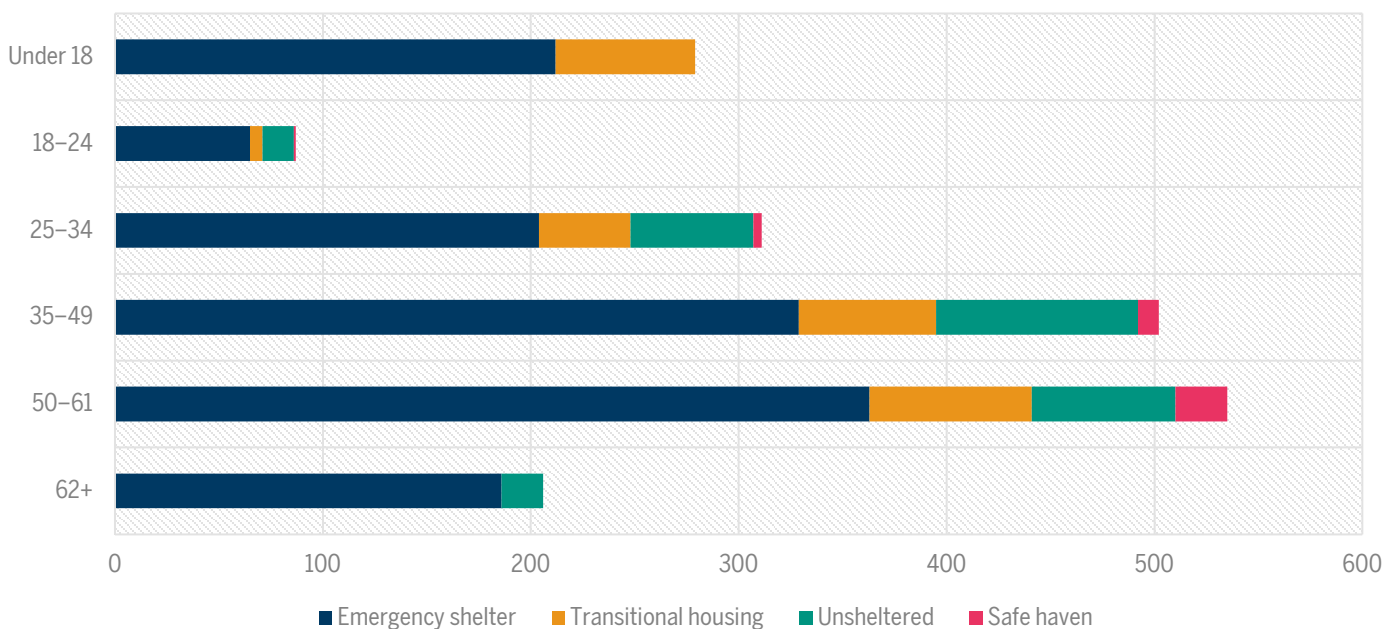


FIGURE 4. Age by location (2021)



Race and ethnicity

Table 3 shows the race and ethnicity of individuals experiencing homelessness in 2021 by location. As in previous years, individuals identifying as Black or African American made up the majority of those experiencing homelessness, accounting for 54% of the total PIT Count population. White individuals made up the second largest percentage at 41%, followed by multiracial individuals at 3%, and all other racial identities comprising 1% or less.

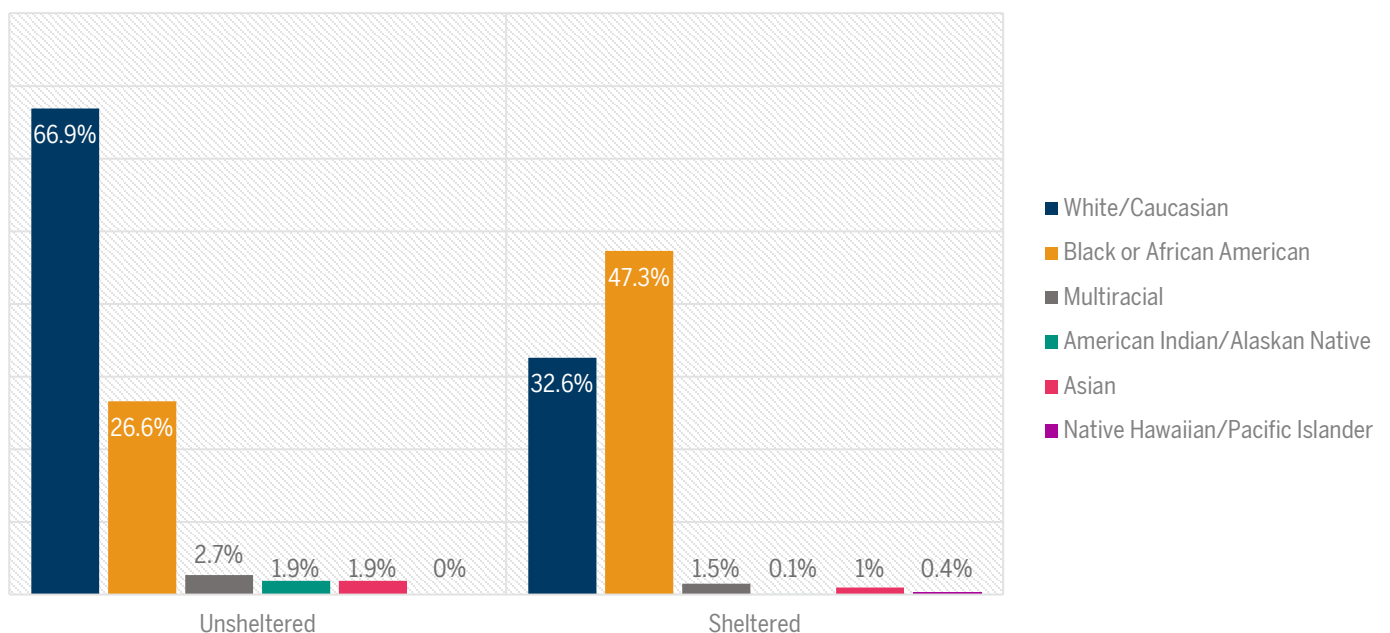
Across all locations, nearly 5% of individuals identified as being Hispanic or Latinx, with the largest number residing in emergency shelter.

As with the 2020 PIT Count, a substantially higher percentage of the unsheltered population identified as white, while a greater percentage of sheltered individuals identified as Black or African American (Figure 5).

TABLE 3. Reported race and ethnicity of individuals experiencing homelessness by location (2021)

	EMERGENCY SHELTER	TRANSITIONAL HOUSING	SAFE HAVEN	UNSHELTERED	2021 TOTAL	% OF TOTAL POPULATION
American Indian or Alaskan Native	7	1	0	5	13	0.7%
Asian	13	2	1	5	21	1.1%
Black or African American	764	190	16	70	1,040	53.9%
Multiracial	47	12	0	7	66	3.4%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	5	1	0	0	6	0.3%
White or Caucasian	482	98	26	176	782	40.6%
Total	1,318	304	43	263	1,928	100%
Hispanic/Latinx ethnicity [any race]	53	22	1	10	86	4.5%

FIGURE 5. Racial disparities in sheltered and unsheltered populations (2021)



CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

HUD defines someone as chronically homeless when they:

1. Have at least one disabling condition (e.g., a substance use disorder, mental illness, chronic health condition, disability, etc.), and
2. Have been consecutively homeless for at least one year OR have been homeless at least four times in the past three years, with a cumulative time of at least one year.

Because of the shortened unsheltered survey, researchers could not determine the chronic status of anyone who was unsheltered. The analysis of sheltered populations was substantially compromised by missing data. As a result, researchers were unable to analyze how long someone had been homeless or the presence of disabling conditions. Chronic homelessness remains an important issue and it is expected there will be a return to measuring this subpopulation next year.

YOUTH AND FAMILIES

Similar to 2020, there were no children under the age of 18 observed in unsheltered locations in 2021. As seen in Table 4, there were 268 children under the age of 18 in the 122 families or households counted—an increase from 2020. Counts of families experiencing chronic homelessness may have been impacted by data quality issues related to COVID-19 and may therefore be an undercount.

Additionally, there were nine children under the age of 18 experiencing homelessness who were not accompanied by a parent or guardian. Seven of these were in emergency shelters and two were in transitional housing.

TABLE 4. Families with children experiencing homelessness in Marion County by location (2021)

	SHELTERED	UNSHELTERED	TOTAL	CHANGE 2020-2021
Total number of households	122	0	122	+16
Number of children under 18	268	0	268	+65
Number of adults age 18+	133	0	133	+24
Chronically homeless households with children	3	0	3	0
Persons in chronically homeless households	11	0	11	+4

McKinney-Vento

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) monitors housing instability among school-age children using an expanded definition of homelessness that includes children temporarily living with friends or family members—referred to as doubled up—or in a hotel or motel. This definition was used by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Act to collect information on child homelessness in Indianapolis. Because DOE and HUD definitions of homelessness differ, individuals experiencing homelessness under DOE definitions are not included in the total PIT count. However, this brief includes an analysis of the McKinney-Vento data because it is crucial in understanding youth and family homelessness and housing insecurity in Marion County.

TABLE 5. Marion County McKinney-Vento data for the 2021 PIT Count

TYPE OF HOMELESSNESS	#	%	CHANGE 2020-2021
Doubled up	2,199	82.8%	-42
Sheltered	144	5.4%	-20
Hotel/motel	235	8.9%	-36
Unattached	33	1.2%	-31
Other temporary living situation	32	1.2%	7
Unsheltered	8	0.3%	0
Missing	4	0.2%	4
Total	2,655	100%	-93

In 2021, McKinney-Vento liaisons counted 2,655 children experiencing homelessness, a nearly 4% decrease from the 2,751 children counted in 2020. Of these children, about 83% were doubled up, 9% stayed in a hotel or motel, and 5% were in a shelter. Eight students were listed as being in unsheltered situations. However, the survey teams did not encounter these children during the week of the PIT Count. Location data was missing for four children.

TABLE 6. Marion County McKinney-Vento data for the 2021 PIT Count

RACE/ETHNICITY	#	%
Black	1,556	58.6%
White	588	22.2%
Multiracial	132	5%
Asian	38	1.4%
Hispanic/Latinx	325	12.2%
Native American	8	0.3%
Data not collected	8	0.3%
Total	2,655	100%

Black children represented about 59% of those counted by McKinney-Vento liaisons, a smaller share than 2020's 65%. While this figure shows signs of improvement, it still indicates that Black individuals represent a disproportionate share of the homeless population in Marion County where 28% of residents are Black.

The McKinney-Vento program reports Hispanic or Latinx as a racial category while the PIT Count categorizes it as an ethnicity. In Marion County, about 11% of residents are Hispanic or Latinx. Although only 4% of individuals counted in the total PIT Count were Hispanic or Latinx, 12% of McKinney-Vento students fell into this category. This figure is consistent with the 12% Hispanic or Latinx students who were counted in 2020.

VETERANS

As seen in Table 7, 257 adults experiencing homelessness indicated they had served in the U.S. Armed Forces. This represents a 16% increase from 2020. Additionally, this is likely an undercount due to data quality issues in the sheltered count stemming from COVID-19.

TABLE 7. Location of veterans (2020 & 2021)

	2020	2021	CHANGE 2020-2021
Sheltered	205	244	+19%
Unsheltered	16	13	-18.8%
Total	221	257	+16.3%
Percentage of adult PIT Count population (age 18+)	16%	15.5%	-0.5%

IMPLICATIONS

DATA QUALITY

COVID-19 impacted data quality and analysis in several ways for the 2021 PIT Count. First, HUD-approved changes to the survey length for the unsheltered count significantly curtailed the amount of information obtained about this population. Research teams did not collect survey data on individuals' experiences with common barriers and conditions—such as mental illness, substance abuse, or chronic medical conditions—or their length of time being homeless.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

The Indianapolis Continuum of Care's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is evident in the 2021 PIT Count data. Adding noncongregate shelter beds to increase the safety of those experiencing homelessness and the continuing street outreach during the pandemic directly contributed to the CoC's ability to engage in a PIT Count in 2021. Not all communities in the United States completed an unsheltered count which impacts our understanding of homelessness on a national scale. Locally, the pandemic impacted data quality and it is unclear to what degree COVID-19 affected the number people counted and their experiences.

TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

The drop in individuals staying in transitional housing this year could be caused by several factors. Some transitional housing providers reduced their number of beds to de-intensify accommodations and increase spacing in response to COVID-19 social distancing precautions. Others

reduced their number of beds for reasons not related to the pandemic. PIT Count data does not distinguish between the reasons for reduction in number of beds. Ultimately, the Indianapolis CoC should investigate whether the transitional housing intervention is appropriately sized for the community's need and whether it is the right type of intervention for those currently experiencing homelessness. The CoC should also review its transitional housing eligibility criteria and any potential barriers to accessing services.

UNSHeltered Homelessness

The substantial increase in the unsheltered population during the past two years raises important questions for the CoC and the Indianapolis community more broadly. At

least some of the increase in 2021 may be attributed to the change in methodology, as expanding the number of days and times when surveyors are on the street likely led to a more thorough count of those experiencing unsheltered homelessness. In addition to careful examination of factors that could contribute to this increase, the research team should consider maintaining a similar, multiday methodology for future years in accordance with HUD-approved guidelines. This will provide a more accurate comparison with 2021 and increase the likelihood of a comprehensive and accurate count.



INDIANA UNIVERSITY
PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE
Center for Research on Inclusion & Social Policy

The Center for Research on Inclusion & Social Policy (CRISP) was created to address complex social issues and the effects of social policy through applied, data-driven, and translational research. CRISP analyzes and disseminates community-relevant research about social disparities and policy issues.

Our faculty, researchers, and analysts partner with community leaders and organizations to deliver policy guidance, unbiased research, and data-driven, objective, expert analysis to help public, private, and nonprofit sectors in Indiana and throughout the nation make important decisions that directly impact quality of life. CRISP is housed within the IU Public Policy Institute (PPI), which also supports the Center for Health & Justice Research (CHJR), the Indiana Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (IACIR), and the Manufacturing Policy Initiative (MPI).

We wish to thank the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention (CHIP) for their financial and technical support. Both CRISP and CHIP especially want to thank the Professional Blended Street Outreach Team and Faith-Based Street Outreach workers from local organizations. Finally, we thank the Lilly Endowment, Inc. for their significant annual support of CHIP and the PIT Count.

PREPARED BY

Kelsie Stringham-Marquis, *Research Coordinator*
Libby Bowling, *Research Assistant*

101 W. Ohio Street, Suite 400
Indianapolis, IN 46204

Phone: (317) 278-1305

Email: iucrisp@iu.edu

go.iu.edu/CRISP

Follow us on Twitter

[@PPI_CRISP](https://twitter.com/PPI_CRISP)

LinkedIn

[Indiana University Public Policy Institute](https://www.linkedin.com/company/indiana-university-public-policy-institute)

