

# RURAL RESEARCH NOTE

December, 2014

## THE HOUSING ASSISTANCE COUNCIL

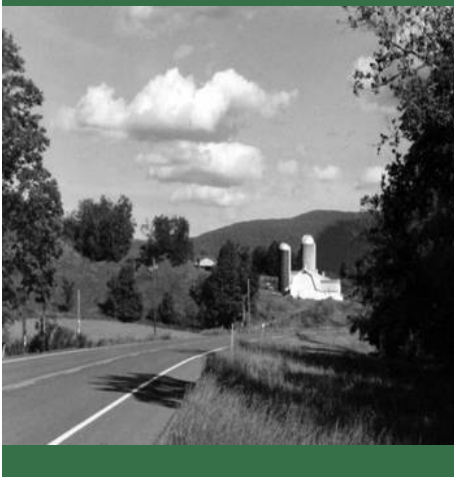
The Housing Assistance Council (HAC) is a national nonprofit organization that supports affordable housing efforts in rural areas of the United States. HAC provides technical housing services, seed money loans from a revolving fund, housing program and policy assistance, and research and information services. HAC is an equal opportunity lender.

## HOMELESSNES DECLINES, BUT IS STILL DIFFICULT TO ASSESS IN RURAL AREAS

Each year, a nationwide Point-In-Time (PIT) homeless count is conducted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in emergency shelters and transitional housing programs to determine where individuals experiencing homelessness are on a specific night. Street counts of unsheltered homeless individuals, including service-based counts conducted at various service agencies, like soup kitchens, are required every other year to determine the number of unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness. Although residents of permanent supportive housing programs and rapid re-housing programs are no longer considered homeless, they are also counted to determine the number of individuals and families that have moved into permanent housing in the prior year. PIT counts are conducted in January as homeless individuals are more likely to seek out supportive services and shelters during cold winter months, providing a more accurate count. PIT counts are combined and submitted through a Continuum of Care (CoC), which is a regional or local planning body that coordinates housing and service funding for homeless families and individuals.

HUD released Part 1 of its Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress in October offering PIT estimates of the sheltered and unsheltered homeless population on a given night in late January 2014. The report details information about specific subpopulations including individuals, families, unaccompanied youth, veterans, and chronically homeless individuals. PIT estimates were reported by 414 CoCs nationwide covering virtually the entire United States. Unsheltered homeless counts were not mandatory in 2014. As a result, only 78 percent of CoCs reported unsheltered counts – for those that did not report, the unsheltered counts from 2013 were rolled over into 2014.

The AHAR sorts CoCs into three geographic definitions: major cities; smaller cities, counties, and regional CoCs; and Balance of State (BoS) and Statewide CoCs. BoS and Statewide CoCs are typically composed of multiple rural counties or represent an entire state if there is no large population center located therein. For the purpose of this research note, “rural” serves as a proxy



for individuals living within the jurisdiction of a BoS or Statewide CoC.

Homeless counts in rural areas can be more challenging to conduct than counts in urban or suburban regions. Homeless services are more difficult to access due to the large, spread-out nature of rural America. Literal homelessness, the condition of living on the street or in a shelter, is often episodic and less common in rural areas than in cities due to kinship networks. Homelessness in rural areas is typically experienced through precarious housing conditions, where individuals move from one extremely substandard, overcrowded, and/or cost-burdened housing situation to another, often doubling or tripling up with friends or relatives.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the rural homeless population is less visible, and there is often a dearth of service providers and resources, greatly increasing the difficulty of conducting an accurate PIT count.

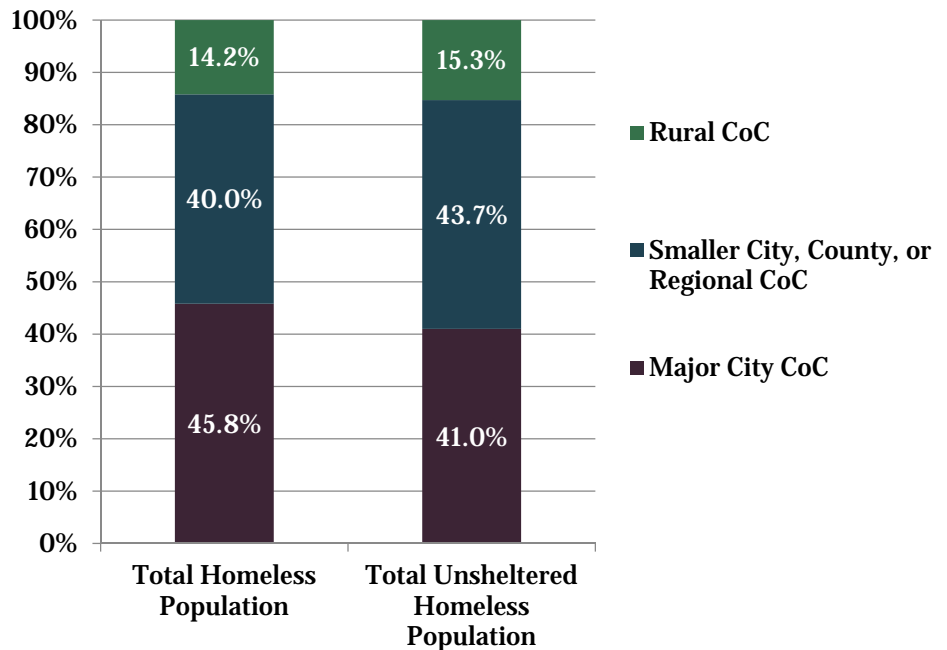
### Changes in Rural Homelessness from 2013 to 2014

Rural CoCs	Total Change		Sheltered Change		Unsheltered Change	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Overall	-3,508	-4.1	1,163	2.2	-4,671	-15.0
Individuals	-2,343	-4.7	1,420	5.4	-3,763	-15.7
Families	-1,165	-3.3	-257	-0.9	-908	-12.7
Unaccompanied Youth	-223	-3.6	37	1.1	-260	-9.2
Veterans	-1,431	-18.2	-474	-10.3	-957	-29.2
Chronic Homelessness	389	4.0	489	12.8	-100	-1.7
National	-13,399	-2.3	6,385	1.6	-19,784	-10.3

According to the PIT, homelessness in rural America is declining. In 2014, rural areas experienced a 4.1 percent decrease in homelessness and are underrepresented within the national homeless population. Rural America’s homeless population, however, is overrepresented in terms of unsheltered individuals – 15.3 percent of all unsheltered homeless individuals live in rural areas. Homeless individuals living in smaller cities, counties and regional CoCs are even more overrepresented in the unsheltered homeless population while those in major city CoCs are underrepresented. Regardless, the number of unsheltered homeless individuals in rural areas decreased by 15 percent in 2014, while the number of sheltered homeless individuals increased by 2.2 percent.

At the state level, Texas had the largest rural homeless population in the nation. This is partially attributed to the size of Texas’ population. Although Texas had the largest rural homeless population, Georgia had the highest percentage of unsheltered homeless individuals living in rural areas at 70.2 percent of the total homeless population, followed by

**Homeless Population by CoC Category and Sheltered Status, 2014**



<sup>1</sup> Housing Assistance Council. *Rural Homelessness Info Sheet*. Washington, DC: Housing Assistance Council. 2008.

Hawaii with 66.7 percent, and Arkansas with 60.3 percent. Massachusetts and Rhode Island had the lowest percentage of unsheltered homeless individuals in rural areas at 1.7 percent and 3.4 percent respectively.

### *Individuals*

A homeless individual refers to someone who is over the age of 18 experiencing homelessness that does not have a family. Homeless individuals declined by 4.7 percent in rural America in 2014. Sheltered homeless individuals in rural areas increased by 5.4 percent while unsheltered homeless individuals decreased by 15.7 percent. Rural Texas had the largest homeless individual population and the third highest percentage of rural unsheltered homeless individuals at 68.7 percent. Georgia and Hawaii had significantly higher percentages of unsheltered rural homeless individuals at 87.1 percent and 81.9 percent, respectively. Rural America accounted for 13.4 percent of all homeless individuals and 13.5 percent of all unsheltered homeless individuals in 2014.

### *Families*

Families experiencing homelessness in rural America are declining as well. In 2014, the number of homeless families in rural areas declined by 13 percent. Texas again had the largest number of homeless families in rural America followed by Massachusetts and Georgia. Oklahoma had the highest percentage of unsheltered homeless families in rural areas at 58.9 percent, followed by Oregon at 52.7 percent, and Arkansas at 52.4 percent. Massachusetts and Nevada both counted almost no unsheltered families in rural areas, and just .5 percent of homeless families in rural Rhode Island were unsheltered. Rural America accounts for 15.7 percent of all homeless families yet 26.9 percent of all unsheltered homeless families.

### *Unaccompanied Youth*

The number of homeless unaccompanied children in rural America declined by 3.6 percent in 2014 with unsheltered rates declining by 9.2 percent. Although Texas had the largest number of rural unaccompanied homeless youth, Georgia had the largest percentage of rural unsheltered unaccompanied youths at 85.8 percent followed by Hawaii at 84.5 percent and Nevada at 75 percent. Massachusetts and Nebraska had the smallest percentage of rural unsheltered unaccompanied youth at 1.1 and 2 percent, respectively. Rural areas account for 12.6 percent of all homeless unaccompanied children and 13.5 percent of all homeless unsheltered unaccompanied children.

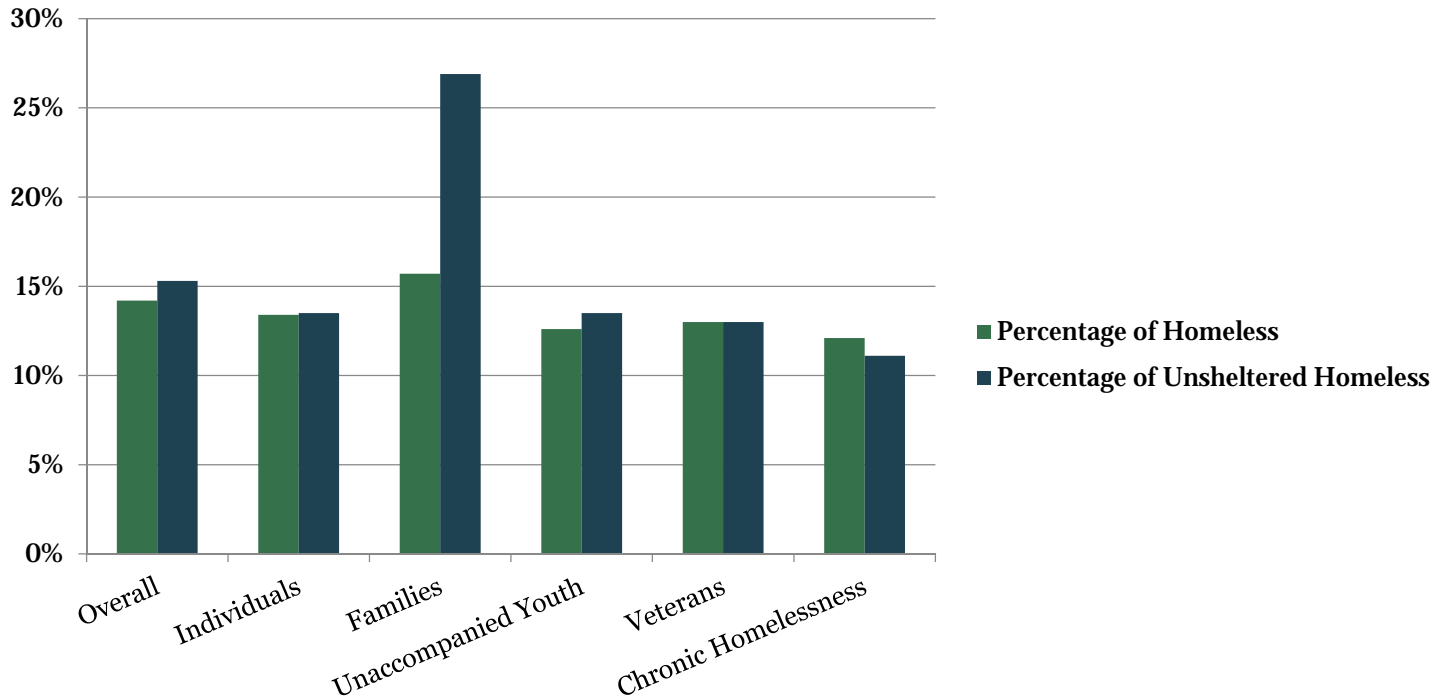
### *Veterans*

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has made a significant push to end Veteran homelessness by 2015 and veteran homelessness declined by 18.2 percent in rural America in 2014. This includes a 10.3 percent decline in sheltered homeless veterans and a 29.2 percent decline in unsheltered homeless veterans. Texas had the highest number of homeless, rural veterans, however the number of homeless veterans in rural Texas decreased by an astounding 54 percent. Hawaii, Georgia, and Texas had the highest percentage of unsheltered rural homeless veterans at 84.1 percent, 77.7 percent, and 71 percent, respectively. Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Alaska all reported almost no instances of unsheltered homeless rural veterans. Rural areas account for 13 percent of all homeless veterans and 13 percent of all unsheltered homeless veterans.

### *Chronic Homelessness*

Chronic homelessness in rural America increased 4 percent between 2013 and 2014. However, more chronically homeless individuals living in rural areas were sheltered in 2014 than the year before – an increase of 12.8 percent – and the number of unsheltered individuals experiencing chronic homelessness declined by 1.7 percent. Rural America accounts for 12.1 percent of all chronically homeless individuals, and 11.1 percent of all unsheltered chronically homeless individuals.

## Percentage of National Homeless Population Living in Rural Areas, 2014



### Steps Toward Ending and Preventing Homelessness

Federal agencies are currently working toward implemented goals to end and prevent homelessness. These goals include: ending chronic homelessness by 2015, ending veteran homelessness by 2015, and ending family and youth homelessness by 2020. The 2014 ARAH shows that we are moving closer to these goals nationally; chronic homelessness has declined by 21 percent since 2010, veteran homelessness has declined by 33 since 2010, and homelessness among families and unaccompanied youths has declined by 11 percent. While this is impressive considering the sluggish economy, with 2015 rapidly approaching, it is clear that there is much more work to do.

In rural areas, it is more difficult to determine the progress made toward these goals. Rural homelessness is declining, and the number of individuals receiving shelter is increasing. Although this is progress, unsheltered homeless families are overrepresented in rural areas and in the rural homeless population in general, and the number of chronically homeless individuals is increasing. The level of success that different states have seen in ending and preventing homelessness in rural areas has varied considerably as well. Although some states are reporting few unsheltered homeless individuals, families, and unaccompanied youth, others are reporting up to 70 percent of their total homeless population as unsheltered. Limited resources and vast geographies make PIT counts more difficult and potentially less accurate in rural areas. But the findings of the ARHA should not be taken lightly. Appropriate and sufficient resources must be targeted to reduce the number of rural families and individuals without a safe, secure place to call their home.

## Contact Us

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION ON RURAL HOMELESSNESS

### Download Part 1 of the 2014 Annual Homeless Assessment Report

For more information on homelessness download the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's report: *The 2014 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress* at:  
<https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/AHAR-2014-Part1.pdf>

### Additional HAC Resources on Rural Poverty

For more information on rural homelessness, access HAC's *Rural Homelessness Info Sheet* at:  
<http://www.ruralhome.org/storage/documents/homelessnessinfosheet.pdf>

HAC's report *Conducting Homeless Counts on Native American Lands: A Toolkit*:  
[http://www.ruralhome.org/storage/documents/rpts\\_pubs/na\\_homeless\\_count\\_toolkit.pdf](http://www.ruralhome.org/storage/documents/rpts_pubs/na_homeless_count_toolkit.pdf)

HAC's Decennial Report: *Taking Stock: Rural People, Poverty, and Housing in 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. <http://www.ruralhome.org/component/content/article/587-taking-stock-2010>

Access data on for your community at HAC's *Rural Data Portal*:  
[www.ruraldataportal.org](http://www.ruraldataportal.org)

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