Some of the most visibly poor people in society are the homeless who sleep on our streets. According to national data, however, they are disappearing. Since national efforts to consistently count the homeless began in 2007, counts of the street homeless have fallen by 32 percent, a seemingly impressive feat in the midst of a historic recession and slow economic recovery. The progress has been celebrated perhaps no more than by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the largest federal contributor to homeless assistance programs. According to HUD Secretary Julian Castro (Sullivan 2014):

As a nation, we are successfully reducing homelessness in this country, especially for those who have been living on our streets as a way of life. There is still a tremendous amount of work ahead of us but it’s clear our strategy is working and we’re going to push forward till we end homelessness as we’ve come to know it.

But are the homeless truly disappearing? Based on detailed analysis of homeless count data, this paper concludes that much of the reported decline is likely artificial. A large majority of the decline in street homelessness is due to large swings in street counts in particular communities. This could indicate miscounting, or potentially, an increase in homeless criminalization (measures that forbid behaviors like sitting or lying in public spaces). Another red flag is that the number of homeless individuals in shelters has actually slightly increased during the same period; this population is much easier to count than those sleeping on the streets. Finally, a massive increase in permanent supportive housing (PSH)—in which tenants are no longer
defined as homeless—appears to play only a minor role in the national reduction in street homelessness, although altered migration patterns could be partially masking its effect. Given that the reported national street count reduction makes up 113 percent of the reduction in total homelessness since 2007, this paper calls into question the nation’s progress in curtailing homelessness altogether.

Before proceeding to the analysis, it is important to note that these results tell us little about whether certain policies are good or bad. Making it illegal to lie down in public areas may decrease street homeless counts, but that is not necessarily good for the people who must find refuge elsewhere. And how much PSH reduces street homelessness in the long run tells us little about how it affects the lives of people who receive it. It is also important to note that the results do not identify causal factors of street homelessness, so, for example, it is possible that street homeless populations would have been significantly higher in the absence of rapid expansion of PSH.

Counts

Each year during the last 10 days of January, Continuums of Care (CoCs)—geographic regions composed of a single city, a county, or a group of counties that coordinate homeless services—across the country enlist volunteers to count the homeless.\(^1\) Exact dates and methodologies vary, and some CoCs conduct counts only on odd years when they are required to do so for federal funding. But a clear trend has emerged since counts were required beginning in 2007: street homelessness is falling. Between 2007 and 2014, street counts have fallen by 32 percent nationwide (figure 1).\(^2\) This represents 113 percent of the total reduction in homelessness over this period. If it were not for the reduction in street homelessness, total homelessness would be rising.

That street homelessness would fall in the midst of a historic recession and slow economic recovery is surprising, especially when counts of the sheltered homeless have been relatively steady (figure 2). Moreover, street counts are inherently difficult to conduct and should therefore be treated cautiously. In fact, it is out of acknowledgement of the relative unreliability of street counts that HUD requires CoCs to conduct homeless counts during the cold month of January, under the presumption that the maximum number of people will be found in shelters and thus accurately included in the total homeless count.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) A small number of communities receive exemptions to conduct counts outside of this window.

\(^2\) All data used in this paper come from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (2014a and 2014b). CoCs that merged at any point in time are analyzed as a single community throughout the study period. Merges are listed in the file “2007—2014 Point-in-Time Estimates by CoC (XLSX).”

\(^3\) The Department of Housing and Urban Development, in its 2008 guide for counting the street homeless, states, “Because it is easier to count people in shelters than on the street or in other places not meant for human habitation, conducting the count on a night when the shelters are most full will lead to the
To understand why homelessness seems to be falling, it is thus essential to ask: why have relatively less reliable street homeless counts diverged from steady sheltered homeless counts?

**Miscounting and Criminalization**

How many people are counted on the street on a single night each year is due in part to two factors that are difficult to observe—the accuracy of the count and homeless criminalization. Inaccurate counting may lead to changes in street counts even when the same number of people are on the streets.

Homeless criminalization refers to practices a city undertakes to make sleeping on the streets more difficult. For example, many cities prohibit sleeping in public areas, ban churches and nonprofit organizations from feeding the homeless in certain public locations, or restrict panhandling. This may cause individuals to stay out of sight or off the streets altogether, especially on nights when counters are out looking for

Figures, Tables, and Diagrams

**Figure 2. Point-in-Time Street and Sheltered Homeless Counts Relative to 2007, United States, 2007–14**

Note: Relative counts are calculated by dividing a count in a particular year by the 2007 count for a particular type of homelessness. Sources: US Department of Housing and Urban Development (2014c) and author’s calculations.

To the extent that criminalization causes individuals to move to other cities, national counts would not be affected.

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most accurate count” (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2008, 25).

While several studies suggest that homeless criminalization may be increasing in recent years, we lack quality time-series data at the national level to confirm this [National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2011); National Coalition for the Homeless (2014); Berkeley Law Policy Advocacy Clinic (2015); and Olson, MacDonald, and Rankin (2015)].

Counts of the street homeless are extremely difficult to conduct and are often carried out by volunteers from the community. Many CoCs must rely on random sampling from specific areas within their jurisdiction—especially Balance of State CoCs, which include large areas of land not already carved out by more-concentrated regions. Counting methodologies are not standardized across the country and may change over time, including rules (or communication about rules) regarding exactly who should be counted as homeless.

Moreover, homeless individuals may avoid being counted, and they may become more adept at doing so over time as homeless counts become more regularly established in a community. Count dates are generally published publicly to recruit volunteers, giving the street homeless who are motivated to avoid counts the opportunity to hide themselves or find alternative arrangements on count nights. Motivations for avoiding counts may include not wishing to be woken up in the middle of the night (particularly in CoCs that simultaneously conduct surveys), hoping to avoid police officers and social workers who might be mistrusted, and fearing the loss of children to
Child Protective Services. Some CoCs have begun offering incentives to individuals willing to take surveys, which, in combination with more knowledge about where the street homeless sleep, may counteract other forces that tend to drive down street counts.

The effects of miscounting and homeless criminalization are difficult to assess. However, large street count changes over short periods of time may indicate changes to counting methodologies or new city ordinances that move the homeless out of sight of counters. In fact, three cities experienced particularly dramatic changes to their street counts between 2007 and 2009. Street homelessness decreased by 47 percent (17,227 people) in Los Angeles, decreased by 98 percent (13,062 people) in Detroit, and increased by 1,074 percent (6,756 people) in New Orleans.

In its 2009 annual report to Congress, HUD cited “significant methodological issues” as the explanation for the drastic changes in these three cities. Beginning in 2009, Detroit stopped using an extrapolation factor previously used to account for individuals missed by counters, while in New Orleans, the 2007 count was thought to be unreliable because of complications from Hurricanes Katrina and Ike (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2010). In Los Angeles, it is unclear what drove the drastic street count reduction. [See Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (2009) for details of the count.]

Miscounting is one possibility, and another is homeless criminalization. Near the end of 2006, Los Angeles began ramping up its Safer Cities Initiative to crack down on homeless encampments and minor offenses on Skid Row. Street homelessness could have started to fall soon after the January 2007 count, as homeless individuals may have responded with their feet to increased arrests and negative interactions with police officers. Figure 3 displays the national street count after removing Los Angeles, Detroit, and New Orleans. Instead of falling by 11 percent between 2007 and 2009, street homelessness falls by only 2 percent after removal of those cities.

Aside from these three cities with large shifts in their street homeless populations, HUD also contacted all of the 79 CoCs (out of 452) that experienced either an increase of more than 100 percent or a decrease of more than 50 percent in their 2009 street counts. These major changes were attributed to changes in counting methodologies in 52 percent of communities, another is homeless criminalization. Near the end of 2006, Los Angeles began ramping up its Safer Cities Initiative to crack down on homeless encampments and minor offenses on Skid Row. Street homelessness could have started to fall soon after the January 2007 count, as homeless individuals may have responded with their feet to increased arrests and negative interactions with police officers. Figure 3 displays the national street count after removing Los Angeles, Detroit, and New Orleans. Instead of falling by 11 percent between 2007 and 2009, street homelessness falls by only 2 percent after removal of those cities.

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### Figure 3. Point-in-Time Street Homeless Count, United States with and without Los Angeles, Detroit, and New Orleans, 2007–14

Note: Los Angeles, Detroit, and New Orleans (and the surrounding areas integrated in their CoCs) are excluded for all years for the series without these cities. Sources: US Department of Housing and Urban Development (2014b) and author’s calculations.

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5 A major methodological concern for Los Angeles was a phone interview used to supplement street counts, which was retroactively removed from all counts in HUD’s 2014 annual report. The 17,227-person reduction reported here is what remains after the adjustment.

6 For additional details of the Safer Cities Initiative and analysis of its effect on crime, see Berk and MacDonald (2010) and Culhane (2010).
changes in weather in 29 percent of communities, and real changes in the number of street homeless people in only 19 percent of communities (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2010). These results lead HUD to state, in regard to interpreting changes to counts of the street homeless: “These results highlight the need for caution when attempting to attribute changes in the data to larger policy or economic factors” (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2010).

To help us better understand the impact of large street count swings in particular CoCs on the national street count, figure 4 more systematically controls for outliers. For each year since 2008, an annual national percentage change in the street count is calculated after removing CoCs with annual street count increases of more than 100 percent or decreases of more than 50 percent. (CoCs are excluded from percentage change calculations only in years in which their street count change satisfied this condition for being an outlier.) Then, new national street counts are simulated based on these estimated national percentage changes, using the 2007 street count as the base period.

Over the entire period, the simulated street count falls by only 7 percent, compared to the reported 32 percent national decrease. And since 2010, the simulated street count falls by only 11 percent, compared to the reported 25 percent national decrease during that time.

It is important to note that the simulated street homeless count is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of the actual level of or changes in the street homeless count. The criterion for selecting outliers is arbitrary, and the implicit assumption that in aggregate these communities actually experienced street count changes equal to the national change is untestable. However, this exercise demonstrates that dramatic annual swings in street counts are driving the majority of the reported reduction in street homelessness. If these swings are indeed artificial and true changes in these communities are closer to the national average, then the analysis here suggests that the observed national street count reduction is largely artificial. Or, if homeless criminalization measures are responsible for the swings (without simply pushing the homeless to the streets in other CoCs), then the national reduction would

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8 Despite decreasing only 47 percent in 2009, the Los Angeles street count change in this year is considered an outlier for purposes of this analysis.
9 Of course, there is no reason to believe the 2007 count is more accurate than the count in any other year, and so this exercise is informative only about the percentage change in street homelessness after controlling for outliers relative to the percentage actually reported.
10 2010 is often used as the base year to assess the success of the federal Opening Doors initiative to “prevent and end homelessness.” For example, see Sullivan (2014).
be due more to pushing the homeless off the streets or out of sight.  

Based on figures 3 and 4, it is apparent that if street homelessness actually declined since 2007, most of the reduction likely occurred between 2011 and 2014. (Since 2012 is not a required count year, it is difficult to date the beginning of the decline.) Table 1 lists the CoCs with street homelessness reductions of more than 1,000 people since 2011. Several CoCs experienced drastic reductions in street homelessness, such as the Balance of State CoC in Colorado, in which street homelessness fell by 88 percent (7,263 people) and Tampa, Florida, in which it fell by 83 percent (5,356 people).

It is noteworthy that 34 percent of the total reduction in street homelessness was experienced by Balance of State CoCs, many of which, according to HUD in their 2013 report to Congress, “changed their enumeration methods to better account for the large geographic region, which could have affected the numbers considerably” (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2013). The state of Florida accounted for another 26 percent of the total reduction in street homelessness, which is noteworthy given the state’s reputation for harsh treatment of the street homeless.

Several cities in Florida experienced drastic changes during this period—street homelessness fell by 85 percent (5,503 people) in Tampa between 2011 and 2013, by 87 percent (1,791 people) in Orlando between 2013 and 2014, and by 73 percent (804 people) in Jacksonville between 2013 and 2014. The state of Louisiana accounted for an additional 9 percent of the total reduction in street homelessness. The state’s street count dropped dramatically, by 81 percent (4,783 people) in just three years, despite a small increase in its sheltered population.

In total, 69 percent of the national reduction in street homelessness during the 2011–14 period came in a combination of Balance of State communities, Florida, and Louisiana. Given the difficulty in counting the street homeless in Balance of State communities, the reputation of Florida for homeless criminalization laws along with dramatic annual street count reductions in particular communities, and the dramatic street count reduction in Louisiana, miscounting and criminalization may play major roles in explaining the national reduction in street homelessness during this period.

Next, I will consider alternative explanations for the reduction in street homelessness in the midst of a steady sheltered count.

**Different Populations**

An obvious potential explanation for the difference in trajectories for numbers of the street homeless and sheltered homeless is that they are two distinct populations that are affected by different conditions. For example, improving macroeconomic conditions over the past few years may have been more advantageous for the types of people who sleep on the street than the types of people who sleep in shelters. The most basic difference between the two populations is household status: according to the 2014 annual count, 86 percent of the street homeless were single individuals, compared to 52 percent of the sheltered homeless. Single adults are more likely to transition between the streets and shelters, while families are much less likely to ever end up on the street. If the differences in the types of households that experience street homelessness were causing that population’s decrease, we would expect both street homelessness and sheltered homelessness to be falling more rapidly among single individuals.

On the contrary, street homelessness has fallen by 24 percent among single individuals, but by 57 percent among families (figure 5). Meanwhile,  

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11 Smaller changes in street counts that are a result of miscounting or criminalization are not captured by this analysis.
12 The only community that experienced an increase in street homelessness of more than 1,000 during this period was Los Angeles, where it increased from 17,740 in 2011 to 22,590 in 2014.
13 In a November 12, 2014, interview in the New York Times, Michael Stoops of the National Coalition for the Homeless states, “Florida has had a sorry history of criminalizing the homeless. That war is being played out all around the country. Florida leads the pack” (Alvarez and Robles 2014).
14 The state’s increase in permanent supportive housing beds (1,422) is significant but too small to explain the decline.
Table 1. Changes in Street Homeless and Sheltered Homeless Counts, CoCs with Greater Than 1,000-Person Street Count Reductions and Regions, 2011–14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Change in Street Count</th>
<th>Percent Change in Street Count</th>
<th>Percent of US Street Count Reduction</th>
<th>Sheltered Count Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Balance of State, CO</strong></td>
<td>−7,263</td>
<td>−88%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tampa, FL</strong></td>
<td>−5,356</td>
<td>−83%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>−36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Balance of State, TX</strong></td>
<td>−4,693</td>
<td>−48%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New Orleans, LA</strong></td>
<td>−4,556</td>
<td>−85%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>−150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Balance of State, GA</strong></td>
<td>−3,538</td>
<td>−40%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>−53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Riverside, CA</strong></td>
<td>−3,202</td>
<td>−63%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>−56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Balance of State, OR</strong></td>
<td>−2,935</td>
<td>−62%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Orange County, CA</strong></td>
<td>−2,594</td>
<td>−61%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>−512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Houston, TX</strong></td>
<td>−2,127</td>
<td>−48%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>−1,036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Orlando, FL</strong></td>
<td>−2,122</td>
<td>−89%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>−139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fresno, CA</strong></td>
<td>−1,939</td>
<td>−51%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>−604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Baltimore, MD</strong></td>
<td>−1,500</td>
<td>−84%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>−27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>San Diego, CA</strong></td>
<td>−1,471</td>
<td>−27%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citrus County, FL</strong></td>
<td>−1,184</td>
<td>−85%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>−20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jacksonville, FL</strong></td>
<td>−1,139</td>
<td>−80%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fort Walton Beach, FL</strong></td>
<td>−1,014</td>
<td>−44%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>−173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Atlanta, GA</strong></td>
<td>−1,003</td>
<td>−42%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>−1,005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal</strong></td>
<td><strong>−47,636</strong></td>
<td><strong>−61%</strong></td>
<td><strong>86%</strong></td>
<td><strong>−2,540</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Regions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regions</th>
<th>Change in Street Count</th>
<th>Percent Change in Street Count</th>
<th>Percent of US Street Count Reduction</th>
<th>Sheltered Count Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Balance of States</strong></td>
<td>−19,153</td>
<td>−42%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Florida</strong></td>
<td>−14,172</td>
<td>−40%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>−973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Louisiana</strong></td>
<td>−4,783</td>
<td>−81%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>California</strong></td>
<td>−3,000</td>
<td>−4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>−8,176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Texas</strong></td>
<td>−2,979</td>
<td>−37%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>−1,092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New York</strong></td>
<td>436</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>−1%</td>
<td>16,709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Other Regions</strong></td>
<td>−11,877</td>
<td>−20%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>1,181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>−55,528</strong></td>
<td><strong>−24%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>8,735</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * Includes surrounding metropolitan area or counties.  
# Excludes Texas Balance of State.  
Sources: US Department of Housing and Urban Development (2014a), US Department of Housing and Urban Development (2014b), and author’s calculations.
sheltered homelessness has decreased by 2 percent among single individuals and increased by 8 percent among families (figure 6). Although the decline in sheltered homelessness among single individuals is consistent with this group’s faring better since 2007, their much smaller decline in street homelessness (relative to nonchronically homeless individuals. And indeed, a recent federal push to concentrate on serving the chronically homeless appears to have decreased their numbers. Since 2007 among chronically homeless individuals, there has been a 33 percent reduction (25,632 people) in street

Moreover, the decline in sheltered homelessness among single individuals is quite modest and, importantly, does not extend to the period from 2011 to 2014 when most of the reduction in the national street count occurred.

Although differences in household status do not appear to be driving the divergence in the street and sheltered counts, it is possible that certain types of individuals are. A distinction often made among single individuals sleeping on the streets and those in shelters is based on their length of homelessness. The chronically homeless are defined as individuals who have been continuously homeless for the past year or during four distinct spells in the past three years and have a disabling condition (for example, a substance abuse disorder, severe mental illness, a developmental disability, or chronic physical illness). Sixty-three percent of chronically homeless individuals are found on the street, compared with 36 percent of families) is not.
homelessness and a 25 percent reduction (10,565 people) in sheltered homelessness. However, the decline in street homelessness among chronic, single individuals makes up only 31 percent of the national decline since 2007 and only 18 percent of the national decline since 2010. Although it appears that a number of chronically homeless individuals may have been taken off the streets—given that both their street and sheltered numbers fell simultaneously—this cannot explain a large share of the national street homelessness decline.

Sticky Shelters

Another potential explanation for the different trajectories of street and sheltered homeless counts is that shelters are sticky—even as the overall homeless population changes, the number of people in shelters remains constant. Improving macroeconomic conditions or policies that curtail homelessness could move increasing numbers of people off the streets and out of shelters alike, with the newly opened shelter spots taken by the remaining street homeless population or by people in poor housing conditions (for example, those who are doubled up or facing abusive family situations).

To keep their beds full in the midst of decreasing demand, shelters could loosen eligibility requirements or make their services more desirable. This would have the effect of decreasing the street population while maintaining a constant sheltered population.

Figure 7 displays the distribution of the largest annual shelter bed changes experienced by each CoC that has a significant sheltered homeless population. Since 2007, 34 percent of CoCs have never experienced more than a 10 percent annual decrease in shelter beds, while 43 percent of CoCs have never experienced more than a 10 percent increase in shelter beds. Whether this suggests that shelters are sticky depends on how quickly demand changed from year to year, but it is certainly not impossible for many communities to significantly change their shelter capacity. It is unclear, however, whether these changes are responses to changes in demand or to other factors such as budget cuts or political agendas.

An explanation for falling street counts based on sticky shelters relies on reduced demand for shelter. But it is conceivable that demand for shelter actually increased during the period

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15 Chronically homeless families have been tracked only since 2011, but their numbers have remained steady. Chronic homelessness among families decreased by 2 percent (369 people) between 2011 and 2014.

16 Whether the key policy geared toward the chronically homeless—permanent supportive housing—substantially reduced street counts is considered later in this paper.
between 2007 and 2014. And if increasing demand for shelter was constrained by a fixed or dwindling capacity, the falling street count would be even more surprising, since it would mean more people were at risk of homelessness and more people were being turned away from shelters.\textsuperscript{17}

Evidence on whether demand for shelter has increased can be gleaned from communities where shelter bed capacity is forced to flexibly respond to demand. A select group of communities have “right-to-shelter” laws, which promise shelter to all those in need. If demand for shelter is increasing, shelter beds should increase as well. This is precisely what has happened. Since 2007, sheltered homelessness has increased by 38 percent (17,836 people) in New York City; by 48 percent (2,372 people) in Washington, DC; by 45 percent (1,093 people) in Hennepin County, Minnesota; and by 10 percent (122 people) in Columbus, Ohio, all places which promise a right to shelter for all residents.\textsuperscript{18} Meanwhile, family sheltered homelessness has increased by 121 percent (7,903 people) in Massachusetts, and decreased by 42 percent (211 people) in Montgomery County, Maryland, places which promise a right to shelter for families only.\textsuperscript{19}

Figures 8 and 9 show the relative sheltered counts for communities with right-to-shelter laws and those without, for individuals and families, respectively. Among both individuals and families, sheltered homelessness remained relatively constant in communities without a right to shelter but increased significantly in communities with a right to shelter. (A significant number of shelter beds were reclassified from transitional housing—defined as sheltered homelessness—to rapid rehousing—not defined as homelessness—beginning in 2013. This reclassification could have artificially reduced sheltered homelessness by up to 19,847 people in 2013 and up to 37,783 people in 2014 and likely accounts for much of the lower sheltered homeless counts in these years, particularly among families). If right-to-shelter communities better reflect the need for shelter across the country, the observed decline in street homelessness is even more surprising.\textsuperscript{20}

**Housing the Homeless?**

A final potential explanation for decreasing street counts is that policies that help secure housing for the homeless have worked. In fact, a major push toward PSH for the homeless, especially the chronically homeless who often sleep on the streets, has ensued in the past decade. Unlike emergency shelters and transitional housing, PSH is not defined as homelessness, so individuals placed into PSH are not included in the street or sheltered counts. The inventory of PSH beds has increased by more than 100,000 since 2007, more than enough to explain the just over 80,000-person reduction in street homelessness over the same period (figure 10).

However, table 2 suggests that, among the communities with the largest street count reductions since 2007, the surge in PSH has not played a major role. In fact, the communities with reductions in street counts of more than 1,000 account for 86 percent of the national reduction in street homelessness since 2007 but have added only 17 percent of the country’s PSH inventory. Moreover, the PSH bed increase of 18,498 in these communities represents only 26 percent of their combined 70,729-person reduction in street homelessness. Even under the extreme assumption that PSH beds reduce street

\textsuperscript{17} In this case, figure 7 would then suggest that it is actually more difficult to increase shelter capacity than to decrease it, since large capacity increases are less likely than large decreases.

\textsuperscript{18} See Leopold (2014) for identification of right-to-shelter communities.

\textsuperscript{19} Washington, DC, has a right to shelter only when temperatures fall below freezing (http://dhs.dc.gov/service/hypo-hyperthermia-watch); New York City (www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/housing/housing.shtml), Hennepin County, and Columbus (https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/149015/Corcoran_Recommendations%20for%20the%20Hennepin%20County%20Family%20Shelter%20System.pdf) have a right to shelter at all times. Massachusetts (https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleII/Chapter23B/Section40) and Montgomery County have a right to shelter for families only (www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/SNHS/SNHSShelterSvs-p744.html#apply).

\textsuperscript{20} It is possible that growing demand in communities without a right to shelter leads the homeless to migrate to communities with a right to shelter, causing some portion of the larger increase in sheltered counts in these communities. However, this would still imply an increased national demand for shelter and thus could not explain why street homelessness has fallen while sheltered homelessness has remained relatively steady.
Figure 8. Point-in-Time Sheltered Homeless Count among Individuals (Relative to 2007), CoCs with and without a Right to Shelter, 2007–14

Note: CoCs identified as having a right to shelter for individuals include New York City; Washington, DC; Hennepin County, Minnesota; and Columbus, Ohio. Relative counts are calculated by dividing the count in a particular year by the 2007 count for a particular group of CoCs.
Sources: US Department of Housing and Urban Development (2014b) and author’s calculations.

Figure 9. Point-in-Time Sheltered Homeless Count Among Families (Relative to 2007), CoCs with and without a Right to Shelter, 2007–14

Note: CoCs identified as having a right to shelter for families include New York City; Washington, DC; Hennepin County, Minnesota; Columbus, Ohio; the state of Massachusetts, and Montgomery County, Maryland. Relative counts are calculated by dividing the count in a particular year by the 2007 count for a particular group of CoCs.
Sources: US Department of Housing and Urban Development (2014b) and author’s calculations.
homelessness on a one-for-one basis, their increase could explain only a minor portion of the reduction in the communities with the largest street homeless decreases.

It is still possible, however, that PSH was instrumental in communities with smaller reductions in street homelessness and that in aggregate they represent a large portion of the national reduction. To construct an upper bound on how much of the national reduction can be explained by PSH expansion, we can calculate for each community the maximum street count reduction attributable to PSH expansion, again under the extreme assumption that each PSH bed permanently reduces street homelessness by one person.21 For example, suppose street

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21 This exercise rules out the possibility that PSH expansion affects migration decisions across communities.
homelessness fell by 100 people in a particular community. If PSH beds increased by 50, then the maximum street count reduction attributable to PSH would be 50. If PSH beds increased by 100 or more, then the maximum street count reduction attributable to PSH would be 100. In communities where either PSH beds decreased or street homelessness increased, it would be zero.  

Summing across all communities for 2007–14, the maximum street count reduction attributable to PSH expansion is 40,008, or 49 percent of the total reduction in street homelessness. 

However, it is highly unlikely that the actual street count reduction attributable to PSH expansion is nearly that high, since each additional PSH bed likely reduces street homelessness by far less than one person. First of all, the utilization rate for PSH beds is 82 percent, based on a single-night count of people in PSH programs in 2013 (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2015). Recalculating the maximum street count reduction attributable to PSH based on an 82 percent utilization rate cuts its explanatory role down to 43 percent.  

Second, not everyone who uses PSH was on the street or in homeless shelters before program entry. From data collected on PSH tenants in 2012 and 2013, we know that 58 percent of new PSH entrants were in homeless shelters the night before program entry and that another 18 percent slept on the street (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2015). This implies that on the night a new PSH bed is filled, the sheltered population falls by an average of 0.58 people, and the street population falls by an average of 0.18 people. 

What happens in the long run, however, may be different. Some portion of the 0.58 people removed from homeless shelters could be replaced by the street homeless, leading to a greater than 0.18-person reduction in street homelessness within a short period of time. Additionally, some portion of people who were not homeless prior to PSH entry may have otherwise ended up on the streets or could have eventually taken up a spot in the shelters, preventing some of the other street homeless from moving off the street. 

Other forces, however, could push the long-run effect of PSH on street homelessness significantly downward. Since 2007, 51 percent of new PSH beds were dedicated to the chronically homeless. While many of these individuals probably would have remained homeless for a lengthy amount of time, it is reasonable to expect that they would have moved off the street. 

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Formally, the maximum street count reduction attributable to PSH is calculated as follows: 
\[ \text{Max}(0, \text{Min}( \text{PSH Bed Change}, -1 \times \text{Street Homeless Change})) \].

The formula for the maximum street count reduction attributable to PSH becomes: 
\[ \text{Max}(0, \text{Min}(\text{UR \times PSH Bed Change}, -1 \times \text{Street Homeless Change})) \], where UR = PSH bed utilization rate.
stay in PSH even longer.\textsuperscript{24} Nonchronically homeless individuals are perhaps even more likely to stay in PSH for a longer time than what may have been an otherwise relatively short homeless spell, meaning the long-term effect of PSH on the street homeless count is smaller than the immediate effect of removing someone from the street.\textsuperscript{25} Finally, additional PSH could induce people to stay on the streets longer rather than moving into undesirable housing situations to potentially qualify for PSH. This would further reduce the effect of PSH on street homelessness.

Altogether, the maximum street count reduction attributable to PSH of 49 percent is scaled down to 43 percent solely by accounting for an 82 percent utilization rate. Given the low proportion of people actually taken in from the streets, the likelihood that people stay in PSH longer than they would have remained homeless, and the incentive effect to stay homeless longer to qualify for PSH, the actual street count reduction attributable to PSH is probably much smaller still.

An important caveat to this analysis is that it does not account for the possibility that expanding PSH altered homeless migration patterns. For example, an expansion of PSH in Phoenix could initially reduce the city’s own street homeless population but cause the street homeless from other cities to move to Phoenix in hopes of attaining PSH as well. Although the street homeless population in Phoenix may not change in net, the national street homeless population would fall. In general, to the extent that the homeless migrate to other cities in response to PSH expansion, or migrate less frequently because they receive PSH, a larger portion of the national street count reduction could be attributable to PSH expansion.

According to a 1996 national survey, 44 percent of homeless people interviewed reported moving from one community to another while homeless, although only 16 percent were living in a different state than the one in which they became homeless (Interagency Council on Homelessness 1999). Of those who moved, 21 percent stated that they moved to their new community because of the availability of shelters and missions, while another 19 percent stated that they moved because of the availability of good services or programs (Interagency Council on Homelessness 1999).

It is difficult to determine how these responses have changed since 1996, whether they reflect actual behavior, and how individuals respond to PSH expansion specifically. Although PSH may be seen as particularly valuable, it is likely more difficult to predict when PSH expansion will occur, whether newcomers to a community would have a significant chance of attaining a bed, and how long it will take eligible newcomers to receive a placement. Moreover, to avoid attracting the homeless, communities may be careful not to offer PSH to newcomers or to those they expect would otherwise soon move away.

Ultimately, however, how much migration patterns were affected by PSH expansion is an empirical question that has yet to be answered, making it difficult to estimate how PSH expansion in particular communities affected street count reductions in other communities. If migration patterns were indeed substantially affected by differences in PSH expansion across communities, this could mask some of the role of PSH expansion in the national decline in street homelessness.

\section*{Conclusion}

It is tempting to point to the 32 percent reduction in street homelessness since 2007 as evidence that we have finally discovered what works in “ending” homelessness. Detailed analysis of homeless count data, however, suggests we should proceed with caution before making such declarations. More reliable sheltered homeless counts have remained steady, a fact which is not explained by differences in the population of the street and sheltered homeless or by an inability to shut down shelters. Substantial expansion of permanent supportive housing likely plays only a

\textsuperscript{24} Byrne et al. (2014) estimate that it takes about 14 total PSH beds to reduce chronic homelessness (street and sheltered combined) by one person. However, the study is not designed to establish the causal impact of PSH (since communities may expand PSH in response to higher rates of chronic homelessness) and thus may underestimate the impact of PSH on chronic homelessness.

\textsuperscript{25} For example, suppose an individual placed from the streets into PSH stays there forever. If he would have otherwise escaped homelessness on his own within one year, PSH would have no long-term effect on the homeless count.
minor role in the national street count reduction, although it is possible that altered migration patterns have partly masked its effect. Ultimately, the most likely major explanations for the street count reduction are miscounting and, possibly, homeless criminalization. It may, therefore, be too soon to celebrate a national decrease in overall homelessness, as that completely relies on the questionable decrease in street homelessness.

Communities should continue to work toward improving the accuracy of street counts, and federal assessments of counts should continue to highlight factors that affect their accuracy. The extent to which miscounting and homeless criminalization affect national trends should also be studied and better highlighted.

But perhaps most important, we should stop using homeless counts as our only metric for success. As investment in homeless services continues to grow, our financial and moral responsibility to ensure that our resources are used to most effectively empower individuals to reach their full potential has never been greater. For example, permanent supportive housing programs should not be judged solely on whether they keep people housed, but on how well they help individuals integrate with community, attain work, and overcome debilitating mental health and substance abuse issues. Our shelter system should be judged not solely on how many people are in it, but on whether people with no other place to go are provided a safe place to sleep and with paths to stable housing and economic empowerment.

There is, of course, no single solution since the people who experience homelessness have different needs that require different interventions—from temporary cash assistance to intensive housing programs with ongoing supportive services. But judging these policies solely on the basis of how they affect homeless counts—even if those were completely accurate—is the wrong approach.

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