

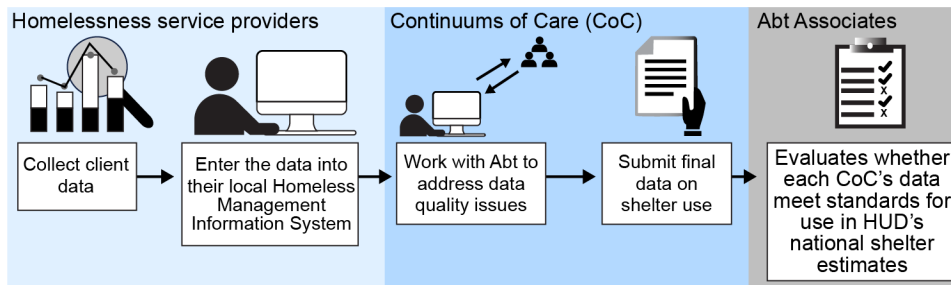
A report to the House Financial Services Committee and Senate Special Committee on Aging.

For more information, contact: Alicia Puente Cackley at CackleyA@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reports national estimates of the number and characteristics of people using homeless shelters. These estimates are based on data from about 400 Continuums of Care (CoC), which are planning bodies that coordinate homelessness services within a defined geographic area. CoCs manage shared databases that service providers in their area use to collect data on the people they serve. Each year, CoCs submit aggregated data from these databases to Abt Associates, a consulting firm that processes and analyzes the data for HUD. Abt works with CoCs to identify and resolve data quality issues and determines whether the data meet HUD's standards (see figure). For CoCs with unusable data and shelters that do not collect data, Abt uses statistical methods to generate estimates.

HUD's Process for Collecting Data on Shelter Use



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) information; GAO (icons). | GAO-26-107502

HUD's process for assessing data quality lacks transparency, making it difficult to assess the reliability of its estimates. Abt staff review each CoC's data to determine whether they should be included in national estimates of people using shelter programs. However, HUD has not defined which specific data quality issues render a CoC's data unusable. Instead, according to Abt staff, these decisions are based on their professional judgment. The Office of Management and Budget's guidelines issued in response to the Information Quality Act require agencies to provide sufficient transparency about their data and methods so that published information can be substantially reproduced. GAO reviewed HUD and Abt data and documentation and was unable to replicate HUD's data usability determinations. Greater transparency in HUD's review process could increase confidence in the reliability of its homelessness data.

HUD has taken steps to improve the quality of aggregated CoC data by offering tools and technical assistance directly to CoCs. Staff at most of the 14 CoCs GAO interviewed said these resources were helpful and that their data quality was improving. However, when HUD determines that a CoC's data are not usable, it does not communicate the rationale to the CoC. As a result, CoCs may be unsure about how to best improve their data and may devote limited resources to issues that may not result in better data quality.

Why GAO Did This Study

Hundreds of thousands of people experience homelessness in the U.S. each year, but developing quality data on homelessness has long been a challenge. High-quality information on homelessness can help policymakers and service providers more effectively target programs and allocate resources.

GAO was asked to review how HUD collects and analyzes data on people experiencing sheltered homelessness. This report (1) describes HUD's process for estimating the number and characteristics of people who use shelter programs, (2) examines HUD's process for assessing data quality and creating estimates, and (3) assesses HUD's efforts to address data quality issues that may affect those estimates.

GAO reviewed HUD data from fiscal years 2021 and 2022 (the most recent available) and documentation and interviewed agency officials. GAO also reviewed HUD guidance and interviewed staff from a nongeneralizable sample of 14 CoCs (out of about 400), selected to reflect variation in location and data quality, and conducted site visits to two of these CoCs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that HUD improve transparency in how data quality is assessed for national homelessness estimates and communicate the rationale for its data usability determinations to CoCs. HUD concurred with GAO's recommendations.