POLICY BRIEF

Reporting on Homeless Mortality: Data Sources and Considerations

April 2025

As more states and local jurisdictions continue publishing homeless mortality reports, it is becoming clear that the varying methodologies used to collect and report this data make it difficult to estimate broader national estimates. This limits our understanding of the nationwide impact of homelessness on the likelihood of dying. Different data sources and reporting categories make it challenging to identify demographic disparities, trends, and other factors that can inform more targeted public health interventions.

This document outlines considerations for reporting homelessness status, age, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity, and manner of death in homeless mortality reports.

Note: Those conducting homeless mortality reviews may not have control over the data they receive and may not be able to make changes. Additionally, new federal-level scrutiny on data elements and reporting measures may add challenges to existing data-sharing protocols and research practices. The considerations outlined in this report are intended to continue advancing this work despite current (and emerging) challenges.

Homelessness Status

Data sources: There are numerous definitions of homelessness and varying data sources for determining homelessness status, though the HUD definition of "literally homeless" is most often used in local communities. Communities using HUD's Point-in-Time (PIT) Count as a population denominator should align their definition of homelessness as closely as possible to allow for calculating rates and comparing to the general housed population.

Considerations: Some communities may choose to use a broader federal definition of homelessness, such as including people who are doubled up or otherwise experiencing housing instability. This decision should be made with consideration of population denominator and intended use of the data. Ultimately, any estimate of homeless mortality likely under-counts the true size of the population given the inherent challenges of collecting data on this population. Regardless of the definition they choose, community reports should clearly describe their definition of homelessness.

Age

Data sources: The U.S. Census Bureau uses 5-year age categories, which is ideal given that categories can be combined later. However, if the cell sizes are too small, use the broader intervals used in HUD's Point in Time (PIT) Count *(see table 1)*.

Considerations:

- Report both the median and the mean age at the time of death.
- Report discrete counts of deaths by age category, not just percentages.
- When there is appropriate alignment with a population denominator, like the HUD PIT Count, consider calculating crude and age-adjusted mortality rates. Rates can facilitate comparison of mortality between housed and unhoused groups. Minnesota is an example where rates are estimated and used for comparison.

Table 1. U.S. Census & HUD PIT Count Age Categories

Census 5-year categories	HUD PIT Count categories
Under 5 years	Under 18 years
5 to 9 years	
10 to 14 years	
15 to 19 years	18 to 24 years
20 to 24 years	
25 to 29 years	25 to 34 years
30 to 34 years	
35 to 39 years	35 to 44 years
40 to 44 years	
…	65 years and over
85 years and over	

Race and Ethnicity

Data sources: Since 2003, the U.S. Standard Death Certificate has contained consistent race/ethnicity categories. Other options include using the 2024 standardized Census reporting for race and ethnicity (these categories represent the minimum federal reporting categories, though jurisdictions can report more specific groups if they choose). A third option is to use the HUD PIT Count guidance, which includes a category for multi-racial people (see table 2).

Considerations: Collecting and reporting race and ethnicity data may come under additional scrutiny based on new federal priorities and directives. Hence, reporting categories that were active previously for the Census and for the HUD PIT count may no longer be supported at the federal level.

Table 2. Race and Ethnicity Data Elements

U.S. Standard Death Certificate	2024 Census Minimum Race/Ethnicity Categories	HUD PIT Count Race/Ethnicity Categories
American Indian or Alaska Native, (Name of the enrolled or principal tribe	American Indian or Alaska Native	American Indian/Alaska Native/Indigenous
Asian Indian Chinese Filipino Japanese Korean Vietnamese Other Asian (specify):	Asian	Asian or Asian American
Black or African American	Black or African American	Black/African American/African
Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano Puerto Rican Cuban Other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	Hispanic or Latino	Hispanic/Latina/e/o
	Middle Eastern or North African *(new in 2024)*	Middle Eastern or North African
Native Hawaiian Guamanian or Chamorro Samoan Other Pacific Islander (Specify)	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
White	White	White
Other (specify)		Multi-racial

Sex/Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Data Sources: The U.S. Standard Death Certificate only includes binary sex categories (male or female). In 2024, the U.S. Census Bureau began testing additional questions as part of a two- or three-step process for both gender and sexual orientation. Additionally, the HUD PIT Count guidance also includes reporting recommendations for gender that jurisdictions can consider reporting if they have access to this information, but it does not include suggestions for sexual orientation (see table 3).

Considerations: In 2025, the Trump Administration added restrictions on federally funded data collection and analysis related to sexual orientation and gender identity. Non-governmental partners may still be able to collect and analyze this information. Because sexual and gender diverse people experience higher rates of mortality, especially due to violence, collecting data beyond binary sex categories is helpful to identify higher-risk groups and inform tailored interventions.

Table 3. Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Data Elements

U.S. Standard Death Certificate	2024 Census Bureau Test Questions	HUD PIT Count Gender Categories
Male Female No data fields capture sexual orientation	**Sex assigned at birth**: Male or Female **Current gender:** Male, Female, Transgender, Nonbinary, different term **Sexual orientation:** Gay or lesbian Straight Bisexual Different term	Man (boy if child) Woman (girl if child) Transgender Non-binary Questioning Different identity Culturally specific identity (e.g., Two-Spirit) More than one gender No data fields capture sexual orientation

Manner of Death

Data source: Use the five standardized categories from the recommendations by the National Association of Medical Examiners:

- Natural
- Accident
- Suicide
- Homicide
- Undetermined (or "Could not be Determined")

Considerations: Data from Medical Examiner Offices are likely capable of separating accidental deaths into three sub-categories: 1) transportation-related; 2) drug- or alcohol-related; and 3) other accident. When possible, jurisdictions should consider reporting all accident deaths and the number of deaths in each of these three sub-categories of accident.

Cause of Death

Data source: Cause of death is coded according to the appropriate revision of the *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD), but may be provided to community partners as outcome groupings by medical examiners, coroners, or health care partners.

Considerations: Causes of death are more specific than manners of death. These include the immediate cause, which is the final disease or condition resulting in death, as well as underlying causes or conditions that led to the immediate cause of death. Similar to manners of death, causes of death are determined by certifiers of death certificates and are not changeable. When causes of death are available, jurisdictions should report them in as much detail as possible. Jurisdictions may find it helpful to review how other communities are reporting cause of death information.

Conclusion

As more communities are conducting homeless mortality reviews and publicly reporting the data, there is a greater need to standardize the data elements across jurisdictions to improve our understanding of homeless mortality at a national level. This policy brief outlines available data sources and considerations for reporting to obtain as much detailed data as possible. Unfortunately, it is premature to issue specific recommendations for this type of reporting given the current breadth of methodologies coupled with rapidly changing policies for data collection at the federal level. Hopefully, future efforts at the national level will make this possible.

Additional Resources

- U.S. Standard Certificate of Death - 2003
- Why We Need Housing Status on Death Certificates
- National Health Care for the Homeless Council: Homeless Mortality Data Toolkit and Mortality and Homelessness Fact Sheet
- National Association of Medical Examiners: Guide for Manner of Death Classification
- CDC Collaborating Office for Medical Examiners and Coroners
- Instructions for Completing the Cause-of-Death Section of the Death Certificate

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