



How to Stop Covid From Exacerbating Homelessness

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During the last ten days of January, outreach workers and volunteers fanned out across the country to count people experiencing homelessness. Over the last four years, pre-Covid, **the number of people staying in shelters and transitional housing programs has shrunk while the number who lack even this minimal shelter has grown**. Covid has accelerated both trends as shelters reduce capacity to keep residents socially distanced, people experiencing homelessness try to avoid Covid hotspots by staying outside, and many congregations that once provided winter shelter programs are forced to close their doors. Even before Covid, over **half a million** Americans were homeless on a single night in January; nearly a million and a half stayed in a shelter over the course of a year.

We do not know what the late January count of homeless people will show, as many communities avoided the health dangers of sending volunteers to conduct a “street count” this year. We do know that the longer-term effects of the job loss during the pandemic will lead to an upsurge in homelessness in the next two or three years unless Congress takes decisive action to increase long-term housing stability. The people most vulnerable to losing jobs during the Covid pandemic have been low-wage workers in the retail and service industries, heavily in communities of color. Already in fragile economic circumstances, they have little or no savings. Their relatives and friends often have low incomes, no accumulated wealth, and little ability to send them a check when a crisis hits or take them in for extended periods. To confront this crisis, Congress should provide both additional short-term funds to get people into housing and longer-term assistance to keep them there.