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Unsheltered homelessness on the rise in Central Florida

May 1, 2023 – Following historic rent hikes and rising eviction filings, the number of people found to be homeless and living without shelter in Central Florida increased by 38% in the past year and by a sobering 75% since before the COVID-19 pandemic, new data from the [Homeless Services Network of Central Florida](#) shows.

The unsheltered number includes people living in their cars, in the woods or on the streets. It comes from the region's annual [Point-In-Time Count](#) – a “snap-shot” census required by the federal government and conducted in communities across the country over a few days in late January.

Nationally, the Point-In-Time Count is widely acknowledged as an underrepresentation of the true picture. But it's considered important in revealing trends.

“As tragic as this news is, we know the root cause of the current crisis,” said Homeless Services Network CEO Martha Are. “Homelessness is a housing problem, and we've all seen the cost of housing skyrocket. At one point last year, rents were rising in metro Orlando faster than anywhere else in the nation.”

Across Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties, the Homeless Services Network, its partner agencies and volunteers counted 2,258 people as homeless during this year's three-day census, a 5% overall increase since 2022. This includes those living in shelters and transitional housing as well as the 587 people who were unsheltered.

But it does *not* count people who were doubled up with other families, sofa-surfing at other people's homes, or staying long-term in rent-by-week motel rooms – as do hundreds or even thousands of families, especially in Osceola County. (The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, which oversees the Point-In-Time Count, does not include that population in its data.)

The findings underscore the vulnerability of the region's low-wage economy.

A recent housing report by [Zillow](#) declared the Orlando-Sanford-Kissimmee metro as the worst U.S. housing market for severely cost burdened renters (those paying over half their income on rents).

In 2019, before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the median rent for a two-bedroom apartment in the Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford metropolitan area was \$1,264, according to [HUD](#). As of April 2023, HUD reported, the median rent was \$1,745 – a \$481 per month increase.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office has estimated that a \$100 increase in median rent corresponds to a 9% increase in homelessness.

“We know that three of every four people who are homeless in our region are experiencing that tragedy for the first time,” Are said. “That means of all the people we counted as homeless this year, the great majority were in housing just a few months ago.”

The latest findings also come despite Central Florida’s significant success in helping to house formerly homeless individuals and families in recent years – including, since January 2019, nearly 21,000 veterans, adults with disabilities, parents and their minor children, and survivors of domestic violence.

And the dramatic increase in unsheltered homelessness mirrors that of many Florida communities where rental prices have also soared. In Palm Beach County, for instance, the number of people who were homeless and unsheltered rose by 33% in the past year, and in Brevard County the number rose by 51%.

Among the report’s other notable findings:

- Of the three counties, the most populous – Orange – also had the largest homeless population: 1,626 compared to 358 in Osceola and 274 in Seminole. But Orange also has the largest concentration of homeless shelters, most of them near downtown Orlando, whose temporary residents are counted as part of the homeless total.
- Of the people who were unsheltered, 56.4% were found in Orange, 31% in Osceola and 12.6% in Seminole.

- Of the total 2,258 homeless population, 454 were people with disabilities who had lived in shelters or on the streets for more than a year.
- Nearly 400 people ages 55 to 64 were found to be homeless, including 146 who were unsheltered. Among people 65 and over, 144 were found to be homeless, including 64 who were unsheltered. As rising rents significantly outpace increases in Social Security, these older Central Floridians have become the fastest growing segment of homelessness, followed by youth and adults under age 25.
- Overall, the number of homeless families with minor children dropped 6% from last year, but the number of homeless adults without children grew by 13% (to 1,457). This is likely due to a reduction in the number of shelter beds for families. During 2022, the COVID-relief funding that had paid for hotel rooms for people infected with or exposed to the virus ran out, while a major renovation project at one busy shelter reduced capacity there. Since unsheltered families tend to stay hidden from public view to protect their children – including while living in their cars – they are harder to find and count.

Meanwhile, it's unknown how much last year's flooding from Hurricane Ian and Nicole impacted the increase, although [all three school districts have reported a growing number](#) of students who are homeless or living in unstable housing, such as motels or doubled up with other families.

In addition to the work of the Homeless Services Network and its nonprofit partners, local governments are trying to address the problem by supporting a spate of affordable housing developments. In Orlando, for instance, the city is using funds from the American Rescue Plan Act to convert the once-blighted Ambassador Hotel on Colonial Drive into 135 apartments for workforce housing and 15 units for permanent supportive housing for homeless people with disabilities.

Those solutions are critically important, Are said. But they're not immediate.

"We know the eviction numbers have been going up along with the rents," she said. "Right now, more than ever, we need our community to work together to address the problem of homelessness. I remain optimistic that we're innovative enough, smart enough and compassionate enough to tackle it."

HOMELESS POINT-IN-TIME COUNT 2023

CoC FL-507 Sheltered/Unsheltered Count

PIT Introduction

January 23rd, 2023

97 Volunteers

Temp 68° Humidity 39%

890 Surveys completed

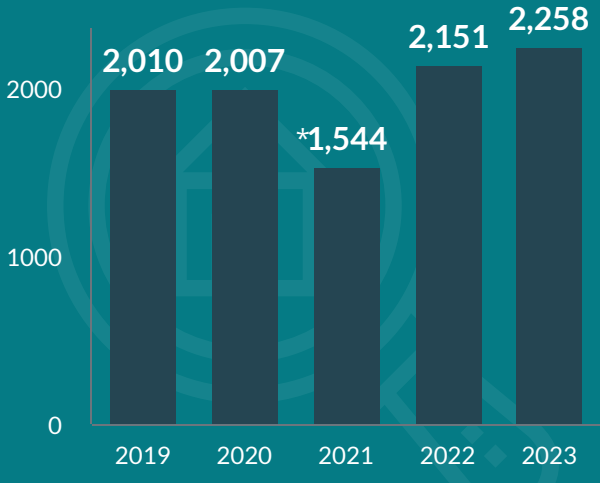
The Point-in-Time (PIT) Count is a survey that collects estimates on the number of people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January.

During the PIT Count, trained volunteers and outreach workers go out into the community and count the number of people who are unsheltered. Shelter providers count the number of people in emergency shelter and transitional housing. The data collected during the count is used to better understand the scope of homelessness in Central Florida.

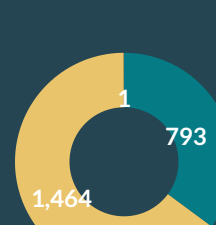
PIT Totals

2,258
Total people counted

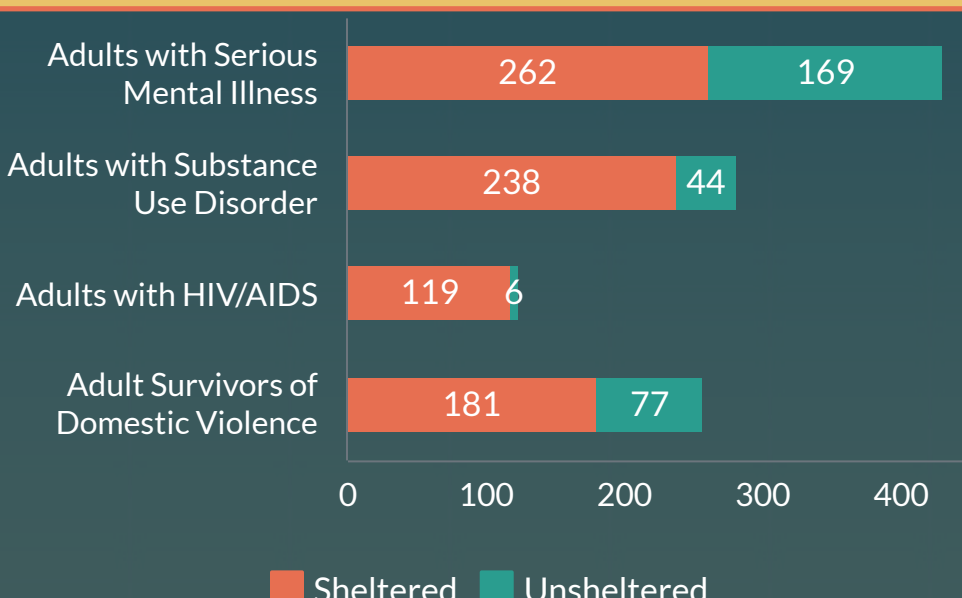
▲ 5% from 2022



Household Composition



PIT Subpopulations



464
Chronically Homeless
▲ 13% from 2022

189
Veterans
▲ 27% from 2022

89
Unaccompanied Youth
▲ 8% from 2022

Sheltered Count



Insights

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the number of people in shelter. Policies intended to reduce the spread of the virus limited capacity in traditional shelters. Central Florida responded by increasing resources available for non-congregate shelter options via ESG-CV funding.

As a result, our sheltered population returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Unsheltered Count

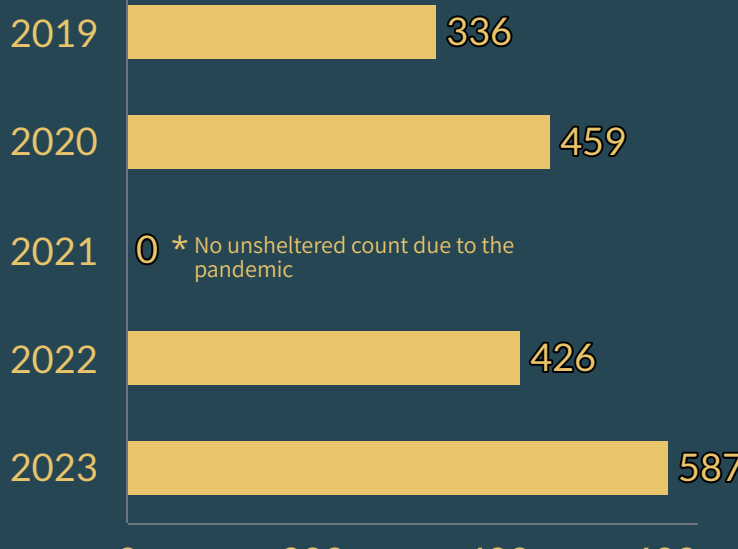
Insights

The number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness increased by 75% since 2019.

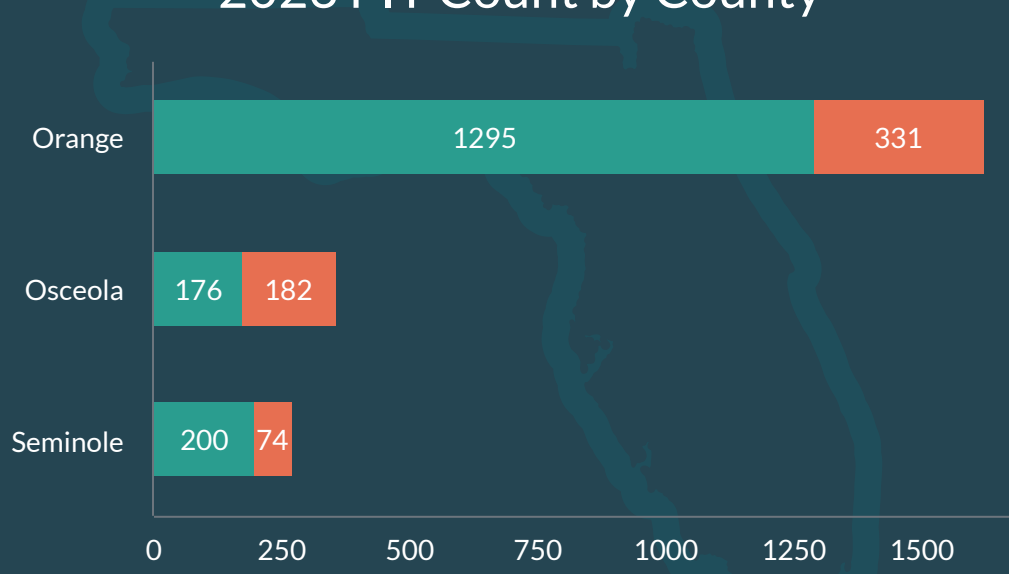
Some factors leading to growth in unsheltered homelessness include the lack of affordable housing, rising rent costs, and increased evictions in Central Florida.



55% Of unsheltered people surveyed are documented in our local HMIS database.



2023 PIT Count by County



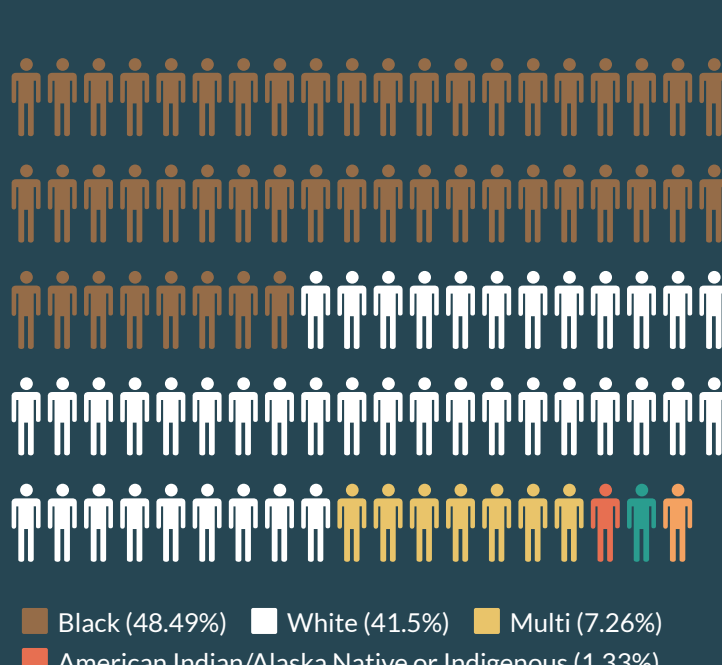
PIT by County

Insights

Since 2019, homelessness has increased in each county by:

- Orange | 5% increase
- Seminole | 8% increase
- Osceola | 67% increase

PIT Demographics



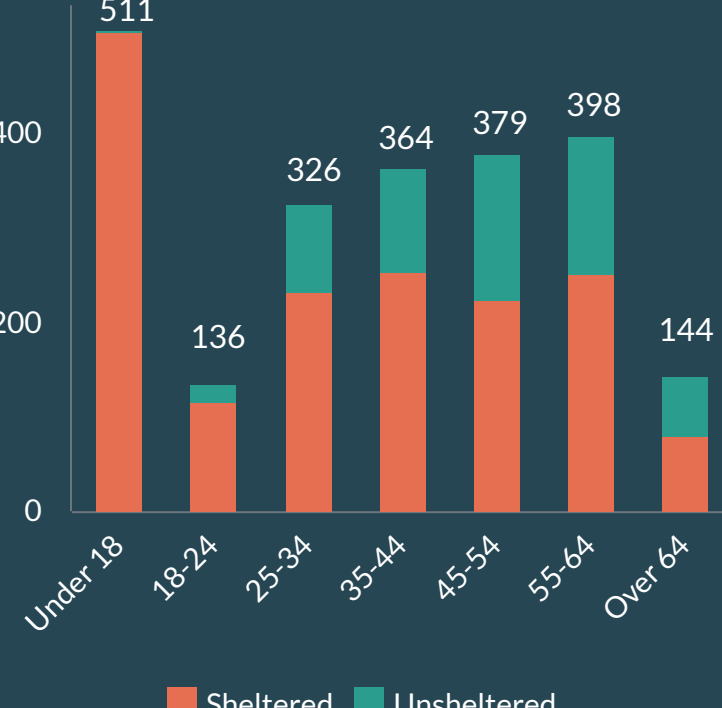
Race Distribution

Insights
U.S. Census Bureau average estimate of race breakdown for Central Florida (July 1, 2022):

- White (74.47%)
- Black (17.03%)
- All Other Races (8.5%)

Over-representation of Black population experiencing homelessness

Age

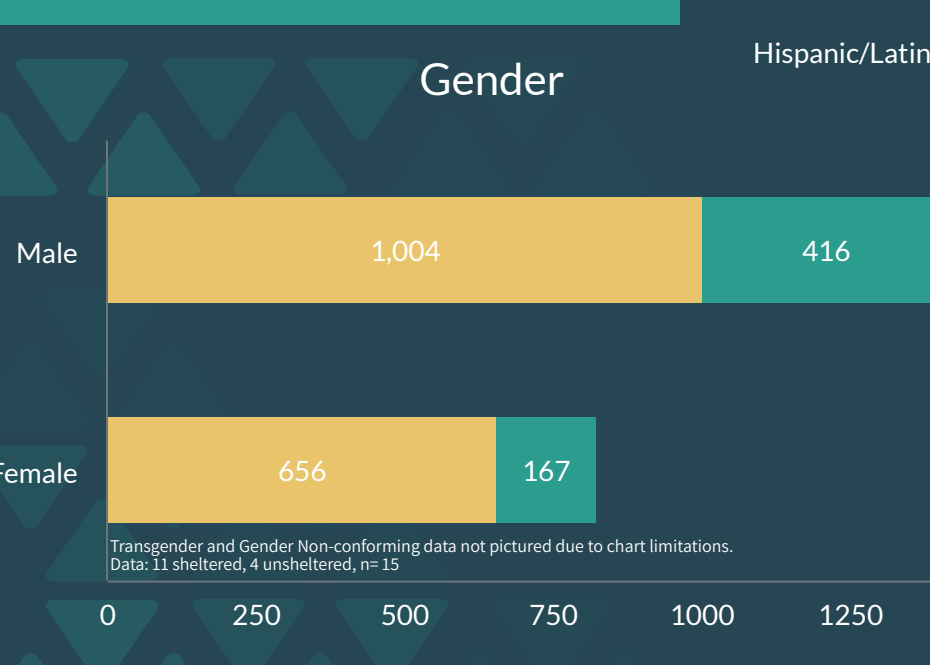


Age

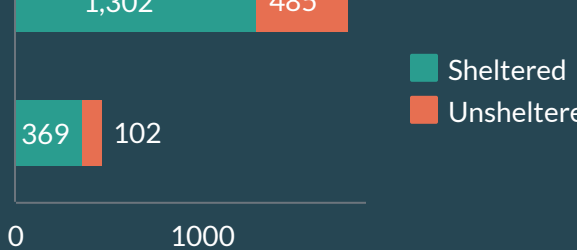
Insights
This year we collected data on the age of people surveyed on the streets and in shelters.

During the count, 99% of children experiencing homelessness were sheltered. 44% of people over the age of 64 were unsheltered.

Gender and Ethnicity



Ethnicity



Insights
People who identify as male (30%) or transgender/gender non-conforming (27%) are more likely to experience unsheltered homelessness compared to people who identify as female (20%).

Check out the official HUD report [here!](#)

Thank you to everyone who assisted with the 2023 PIT Count.