

Northwest Arkansas Continuum of Care 2026 Point-in-Time Count Executive Summary

1. Background

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires Continuums of Care (CoCs) to conduct Point-in-Time (PIT) counts of individuals experiencing homelessness. The Northwest Arkansas (NWA) CoC covers **Benton, Carroll, Madison, and Washington Counties** and conducts the count annually using HUD's definition of homelessness, focusing on **individuals in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and unsheltered locations not intended for human habitation**. The 2026 PIT count focused on the night of February 26, 2026, with additional data collection conducted over the following six days. The count was coordinated by the Dr. John Gallagher of the University of Arkansas School of Social Work in partnership with the NWA CoC, local service providers, libraries, law enforcement agencies, faith-based organizations, and community volunteers.

2. Methods

The 2026 PIT count continued methods used in recent years with no HUD-mandated changes. The CoC again attempted a full census approach rather than a sampling strategy. Data were collected through direct interviews, observation forms, provider-level data, and HMIS records. Direct interviews remained the primary source of information, accounting for approximately 65% of all records. The count continued partnering with unhoused individuals through the Pick-Me-Up program. Outreach efforts in Carroll and Madison Counties were expanded. Significant efforts were made to identify and remove duplicate records across data sources.

3. Key Findings

A total of **563 individuals in 439 households** were identified during the 2026 PIT count, including 225 individuals in emergency shelter, 61 in transitional housing, and 277 unsheltered. This represents **an 11% increase from 2025 following a 23% increase the previous year**. The increase appears to reflect an ongoing upward trend rather than major methodological changes.

Washington County accounted for approximately 63% of all identified individuals, with **Fayetteville alone accounting for nearly half of the regional total**. Using 2025 Census population estimates, the regional PIT rate was approximately 9 individuals experiencing homelessness per 10,000 residents, below the national PIT rate of approximately 23 per 10,000.

Several demographic patterns are consistent with prior years and national trends. **Older adults comprise a growing share of the population**, while gender and sexual minorities remained overrepresented relative to the regional population. African American and American Indian/Alaska Native individuals also continued to experience disproportionate representation within PIT data. Rates of **chronic homelessness remained high**. Briefly, chronic homelessness refers to individuals with a disabling condition who experience extended (over 12-months) and/or recurrent homelessness. It is an important and particularly vulnerable group within the larger homeless population. We also see consistently high rates of **first-time homelessness**.

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4. Key Trends

Despite moderate increases in shelter capacity over time, **unsheltered homelessness continued to rise and accounted for nearly half of all persons identified in 2026**. The increase in older adults experiencing homelessness has become one of the clearest long-term regional trends. Between 2023 and 2026, the number of individuals age 65 and older more than doubled.

Family homelessness remained stable and limited in PIT data. However, local school districts identified far larger numbers of students experiencing homelessness or housing instability under broader federal educational definitions. This contrast suggests that the PIT captures only a portion of families experiencing significant housing insecurity in the region.

Some community-level changes likely reflected methodological improvements rather than abrupt shifts in underlying homelessness. For example, increases in Carroll County were largely attributed to expanded outreach partnerships, while decreases in some communities may partially reflect volunteer and coverage variation.

5. Discussion

The 2026 PIT count suggests that **homelessness in Northwest Arkansas continues to increase** despite relative methodological stability across recent years. While PIT data cannot fully distinguish between true population growth and year-to-year variation, the consistency of several trends strengthens confidence that regional homelessness pressures are increasing over time.

The **continued growth in unsheltered homelessness** is particularly notable and likely reflects both insufficient housing access and limits within broader systems of care and support. At the same time, the findings continue to demonstrate the interaction between macroeconomic pressures such as housing affordability and individual-level vulnerabilities including disability, behavioral health concerns, domestic violence, and limited social support.

Importantly, **approximately 70% of respondents reported last being stably housed within Northwest Arkansas**, a pattern that has remained relatively stable over time. This suggests that homelessness in the region is driven primarily by local and regional dynamics rather than migration from outside the area.

As a one-night estimate using a narrow federal definition, the PIT substantially understates the broader population experiencing unstable housing, cyclical homelessness, doubling-up, or other forms of severe housing insecurity.

Indicator	2025	2026	Change
Total persons	507	563	+11%
Unsheltered persons	259	277	+7%
Emergency shelter	213	225	+6%
Transitional housing	35	61	+74%

This summary was drafted by Chat GPT based on Dr. Gallagher's report and then edited by Dr. Gallagher.