



Highlights of [GAO-10-702](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Multiple federal programs provide homelessness assistance through programs targeted to those experiencing homelessness or through mainstream programs that broadly assist low-income populations. Programs' definitions of homelessness range from including primarily people in homeless shelters or on the street to also including those living with others because of economic hardship. GAO was asked to address (1) the availability, completeness, and usefulness of federal data on homelessness, (2) the extent to which research identifies factors associated with experiencing homelessness, and (3) how differences in definitions and other factors impact the effectiveness of programs serving those experiencing homelessness. GAO reviewed laws, agency regulations, performance and planning documents, and data as well as literature on homelessness, and spoke with stakeholders, such as government officials and service providers, about potential barriers.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education, HHS, and HUD (1) develop a common vocabulary for homelessness; and (2) determine if the benefits of collecting data on housing status in targeted and mainstream programs would exceed the costs. To the extent that the agencies explicitly addressed the recommendations in their comments, they agreed with them.

View [GAO-10-702](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Alicia Cackley at (202) 512-8678 or [cackleya@gao.gov](mailto:cackleya@gao.gov).

## HOMELESSNESS

### A Common Vocabulary Could Help Agencies Collaborate and Collect More Consistent Data

#### What GAO Found

Federal agencies, including the Departments of Education (Education), Health and Human Services (HHS), and Housing and Urban Development (HUD), collect data on homelessness. However, these data are incomplete, do not track certain demographic information well over time, and are not always timely. HUD collects data and estimates the number of people who are homeless on a given night during the year and the number who use shelters over the course of the year; these estimates include the people who meet the definition of homelessness for HUD's programs, but do not include all of those who meet broader definitions of homelessness used by some other agencies' programs. For example, HUD's counts would not include families living with others as a result of economic hardship, who are considered homeless by Education. Data from federally-funded mainstream programs such as HHS's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families could improve agencies' understanding of homelessness, but these programs have not consistently collected or analyzed information on housing status because this is not their primary purpose.

Because research studies GAO reviewed often used different definitions of homelessness, relied on data collected at a point-in-time, and focused narrowly on unique populations over limited geographical areas, the studies cannot be compared or compiled to further an understanding of which factors are associated with experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, although researchers GAO interviewed and most studies noted the importance of structural factors such as area poverty rates, and those that analyzed these factors found them to be important, few studies considered them. Most of the studies analyzed only the association of individual-level factors such as demographic characteristics, but these studies often did not consider the same individual-level factors or agree on their importance.

Many of the government officials, service providers, advocates, and researchers GAO interviewed stated that narrow or multiple definitions of homelessness have posed challenges to providing services for those experiencing homelessness, and some said that having different definitions made collaborating more difficult. For example, some said that persons in need of services might not be eligible for programs under narrower definitions of homelessness or might not receive services for which they were eligible because of confusion created by multiple definitions. Different definitions of homelessness and different terminology to address homelessness have made it difficult for communities to plan strategically for housing needs and for federal agencies such as Education, HHS, and HUD to collaborate effectively to provide comprehensive services. As long as agencies use differing terms to address issues related to homelessness, their efforts to collaborate will be impeded, and this in turn will limit the development of more efficient and effective programs. Commenting on a draft of this report, HHS and HUD raised concerns about its treatment of homelessness data. We characterize and respond to those comments within the report.