

HOMELESSNESS IN WAKE COUNTY

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires that communities receiving federal funds to reduce homelessness conduct an annual count of all sheltered homeless individuals, and a count every other year of unsheltered homeless individuals. These counts are called “Point-in-Time” (PIT) counts because they focus on the numbers of homeless persons on a single night in January. The PIT counts are important in helping communities to determine the extent of homelessness, and they provide data for comparison across years. The PIT count of unsheltered homeless persons has limitations because counting unsheltered homeless persons is more difficult than counting populations of homeless shelters. In 2019, North Carolina had 5,495 people in shelters and 2,268 unsheltered.

Egon Bittner (1967), noted that the general public may turn away from homeless persons, but law enforcement officers do not have that option. They must engage with and protect people who are homeless. In doing so, officers come to see homeless persons as individuals with names and stories, and in many cases dreams for a better future. Officers frequently help people obtain meals, lodging, employment, direct them to welfare and health services and aid them in various other ways.



These acts of kindness and intervention by individual law enforcement officers will not solve the problem of homelessness in North Carolina. But for many individuals, experiencing homelessness, and communities concerned about the problem, officers' actions can be an important first step. How law enforcement agencies and their partners build on that foundation will go a long way toward determining how successful they will be at reducing homelessness and improving the quality of life in their communities.

While the nature of homelessness has not changed very much, there has been a change in how law enforcement agencies respond to it. As Sheriff of Wake County, I see my role as taking the lead and finding innovative solutions, which will involve multi-faceted activities with social service agencies, other government departments, as well as non-government partners to implement direct outreach to homeless individuals, building partnerships with a wide range of service providers, and encouraging my deputies to be resourceful and to show compassion for homeless persons.

There but by the grace of God, go I.

ⁱ HUD 2019 Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Programs Homeless Populations and Subpopulations

ⁱⁱ Bittner, Egon. (1967). The Police on Skid-Row: *A Study of Peace Keeping*. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 32, No. 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Bradford (circa 1510–1555)