

Oregon Homelessness Performance Metrics

A BRIEF

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Overview

Performance metrics serve an important function when it comes to government funding. Foregoing the use of any performance metrics, particularly in the case of large-scale initiatives with many complex sub systems and external factors will at best result in inefficiency and invites chaos. When designed and implemented effectively they provide focus and direction for the use of funds, a method for the public, legislators, and administrators to gauge progress, guide program operations, and help facilitate accountability. If they are designed or implemented poorly, they can create counterproductive incentive structures, confusion, miscommunication, and result in hindering or fully undermining the goals at hand. Inherent within the effective design and implementation of performance metrics are essential considerations related to data quality, as the saying goes “garbage in garbage out”. To date the issue of homelessness in Oregon has been impacted by both the failure to set and implement performance metrics as well as setting ineffective performance metrics and subsequent failures in implementation resulting from poor design.

There is also the confounding challenge of having federal, state, and local dollars being intermingled that sometimes have differing requirements and metrics that do not always align or are not enforced effectively, creating challenges for the providers to design and implement consistent programming in a manner that is conducive to effective measurement. As a general note the use of performance metrics also requires a culture of transparency, accountability, focus on progress and improvement, and alignment towards a properly stated goal. This has been a historic challenge in Oregon particularly as state involvement is concerned.

The main source of performance metrics and data in the homelessness realm come from HUD and are known as System Performance Measures (SPMs). While this data is very imperfect it is the most comprehensive, and publicly available, data and is still useful. The VA also has programs that address homelessness and performance metrics that go along with them. The state level response is disorganized with programs and funding addressing homelessness directly or indirectly coming through OHA, DHS, and OHCS. There are also more local funding and initiatives that come into play as part of the broader conversation.

Section 1 HUD System Performance Measures (SPMs)

Note: HUD provides the following disclaimer regarding SPM data

Please note: Data contained in this report is subject to potential data quality issues that may or may not be resolved during the following year's submission process. Data quality issues that arise from events such as legacy data migrations, vendor changes, and other local causes can drastically impact national or categorical averages. For example, CA-600, CA-607, and CA-612 experienced a vendor change in 2017 which caused inconsistent reporting from one year to the next. HUD is aware that each year data quality issues exist from these kinds of system changes but does not know each CoC that is impacted or the magnitude of the impact. Therefore, please use the results with discretion.

The HUD SPMs apply to programs that receive HUD funding through the Continuum of Care (CoC) program and consist of seven measures with multiple metrics comprising the measures (HUD 2015):

1. Length of Time Persons Remain Homeless
2. Returns to Homelessness (from permanent housing)
 - a. The Extent to which Persons who Exit Homelessness to Permanent Housing Destinations Return to Homelessness within 6 to 12 Months
 - b. The Extent to which Persons who Exit Homelessness to
 - c. Permanent Housing Destinations Return to Homelessness within 2 Years
3. Number of Homeless Persons
4. Employment and Income Growth for Homeless Persons in CoC Program-funded Projects
5. Number of Persons who Become Homeless for the First Time
6. Homelessness Prevention and Housing Placement of Persons Defined by Category 3 of HUD's Homeless Definition in CoC Program-funded Projects
 - a. Preventing Returns to Homelessness within 6 and 12 Months Among This Subset of Families and Youth
 - b. Preventing Returns to Homelessness within 24 Months Among This Subset of Families and Youth
 - c. Successful Housing Placement Among This Subset of Families and Youth
7. Successful Placement and Retention of Housing
 - a. Successful Placement from Street Outreach
 - b. Successful Placement in or Retention of Permanent Housing (exits from shelter, transitional housing, rapid re-housing)

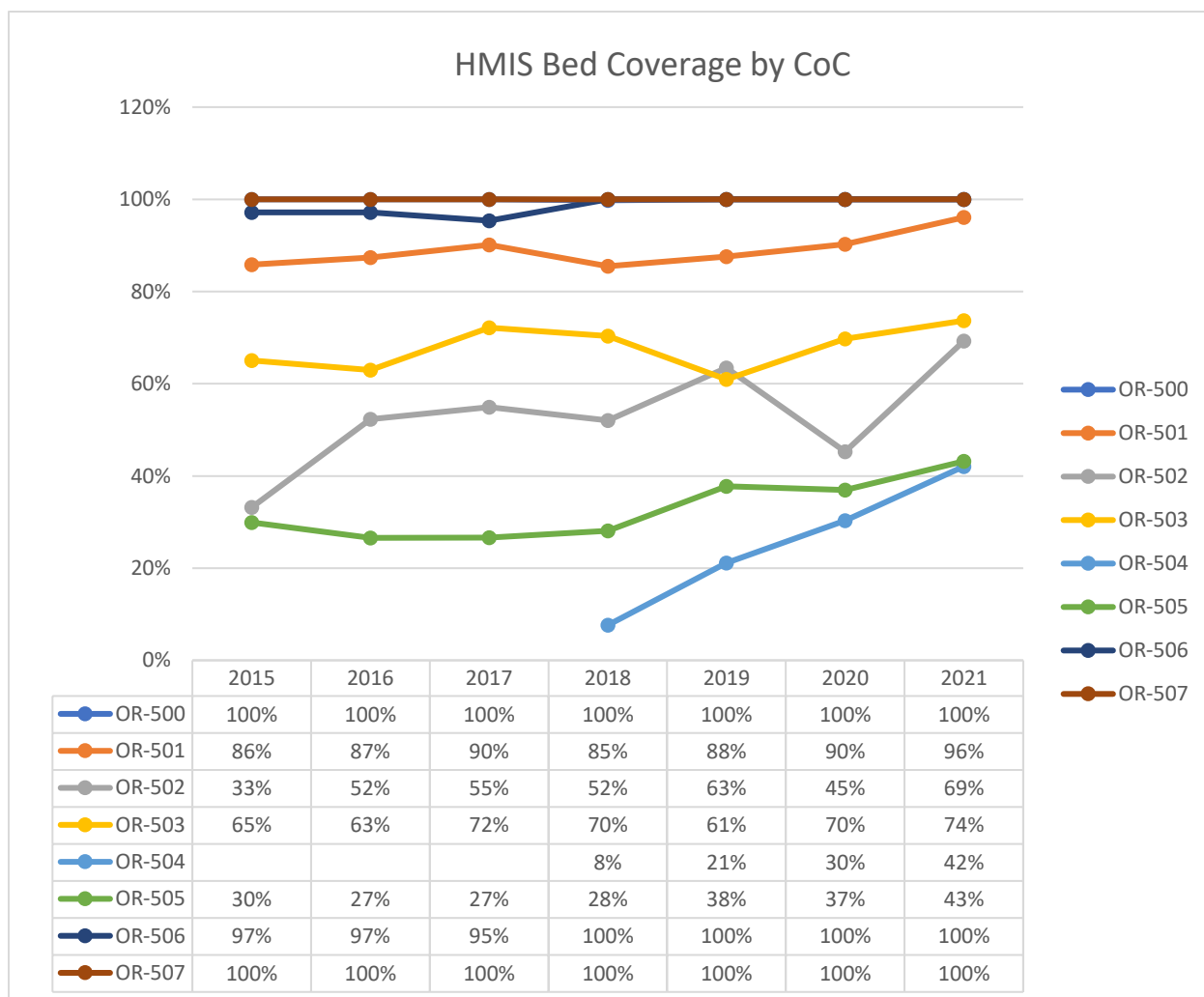
There are additional metrics that comprise these measures. These and other more technical aspects would be more germane to a deeper analysis than what is contained in this brief. An important piece of additional context is that not all housing and shelter programs that are targeted to homelessness are CoC funded programs which means they are not required to enter data into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) that feeds the HUD data set, thus it is not a complete representation of homelessness programs in any given area. There has been a recent push in Oregon to try and get all or most homeless services providers to enter data into HMIS for a variety of reasons with some success. It is also important to note that the data quality and the completeness of data varies across providers. A summary of the national averages on the SPMs can be found [here](#).

Oregon's Performance on the SPMs

The State of Oregon is covered by eight Continuums of Care. The largest geographically is the Oregon Balance of State CoC also known as the Rural Oregon Continuum of Care (ROCC) which covers 26 of the counties in Oregon. Marion and Polk counties split from the ROCC to form their own CoC in 2018.

Continuum of Care (CoC)	HUD CoC Number
Eugene, Springfield/Lane County CoC	OR-500
Portland, Gresham/Multnomah County CoC	OR-501
Medford, Ashland/Jackson County CoC	OR-502
Central Oregon CoC	OR-503
Salem/Marion, Polk Counties CoC	OR-504
Oregon Balance of State CoC	OR-505
Hillsboro, Beaverton/Washington County CoC	OR-506
Clackamas County CoC	OR-507

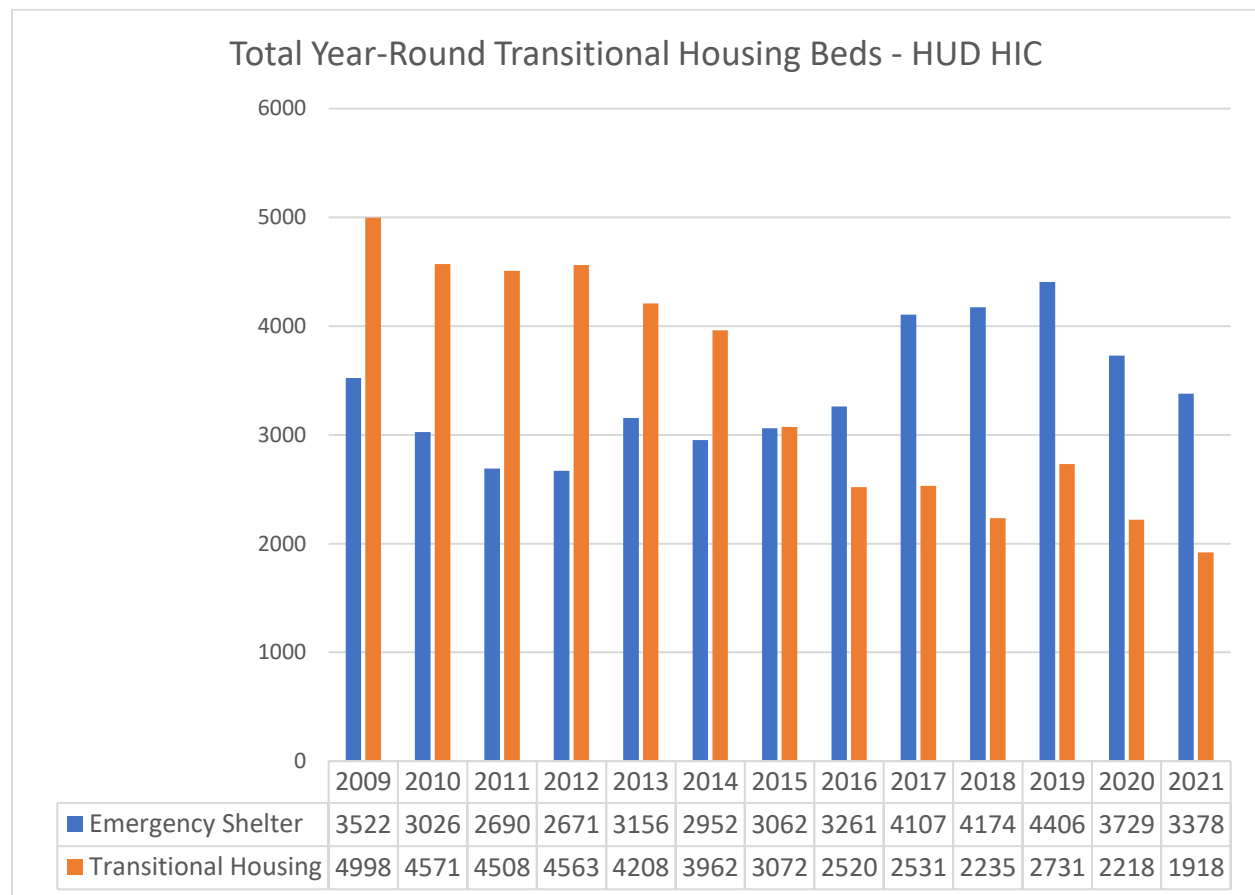
The SPM data tracks HMIS bed coverage, being the portion of total beds in the area for which data is entered into HMIS, while also an imperfect metric it provides useful information on data completeness by CoC region (HUD 2022). Note that this data is based on the Housing Inventory Count (HIC) and is as reported by the CoCs and is not independently verified.



The HMIS coverage for emergency shelter and transitional housing beds is relatively high in the urban areas, per the information they report to HUD. The other CoCs display some recent improvement. Historically there have been challenges with getting providers who do not receive HUD funding to voluntarily use HMIS for a variety of reasons such as imposing more onerous data collection requirements without funding to support it.

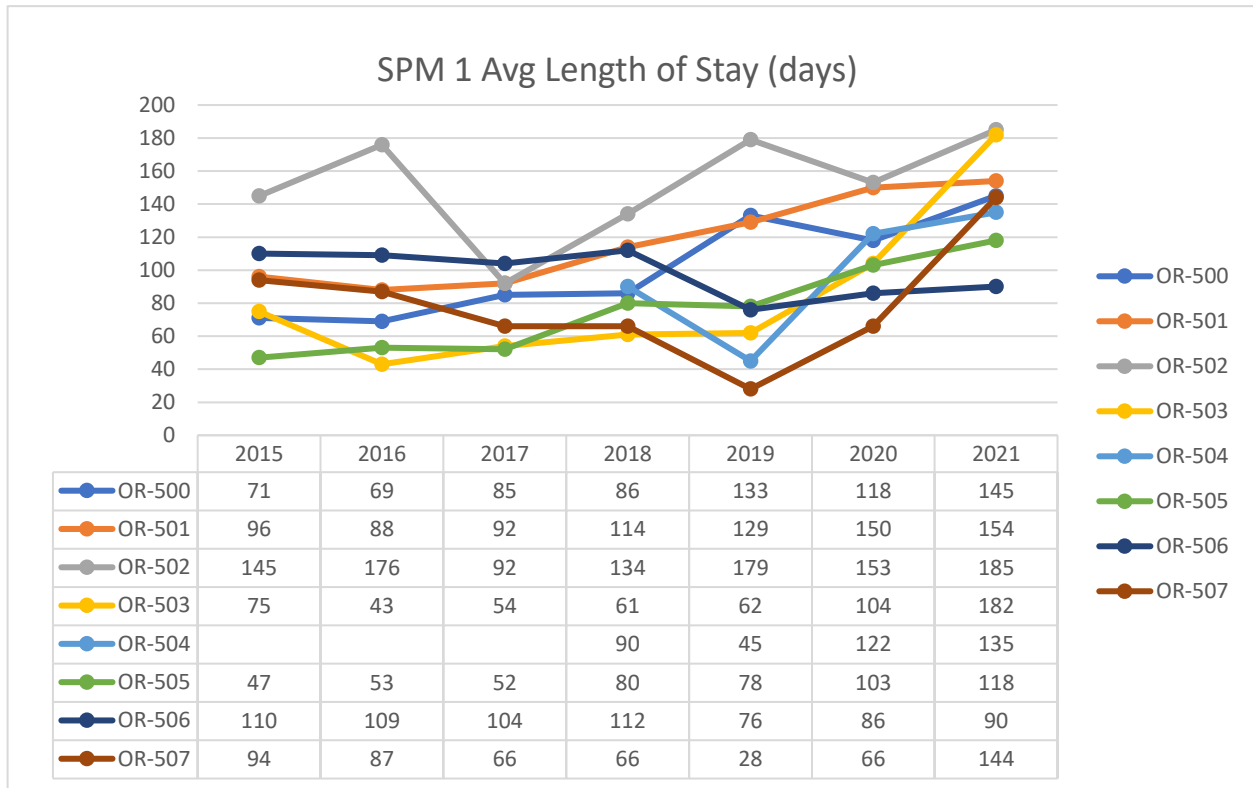
Performance on the System Performance Measures themselves has been mixed as well. A more detailed analysis, including a breakout of the metrics between emergency shelter and transitional housing, as those two housing types serve very different functions, would provide additional insight. However, it is worth noting that volume of transitional housing has

decreased dramatically over the years as a result of HUD pushing funding and guidance away from the use of transitional housing. As such, the more recent figures for the SPMs are comprised predominately of emergency shelter beds. Observe the transitional housing bed count trend below.



We can see the clear shift away from transitional housing with an increase in emergency shelter across the state. Simultaneously since the shift away from transitional housing the total number of beds has never caught back up to 2009 levels. This information provides important context when considering the System Performance Measures given that the goal is reduce the incidence of homelessness, duration of homelessness, reducing the time to exiting the system into permanent housing, and retaining permanent housing.

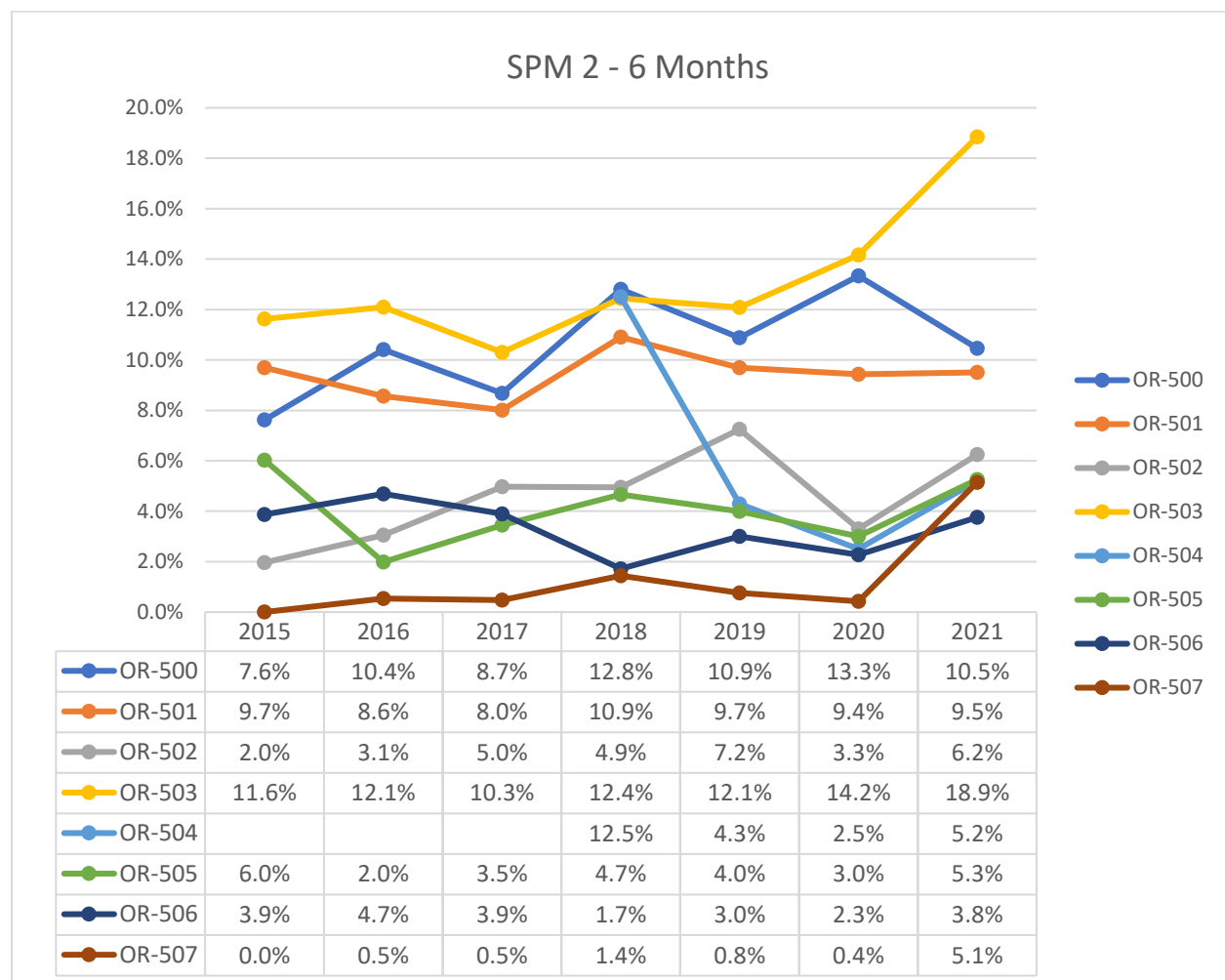
SPM 1 Average Length of Stay (days)



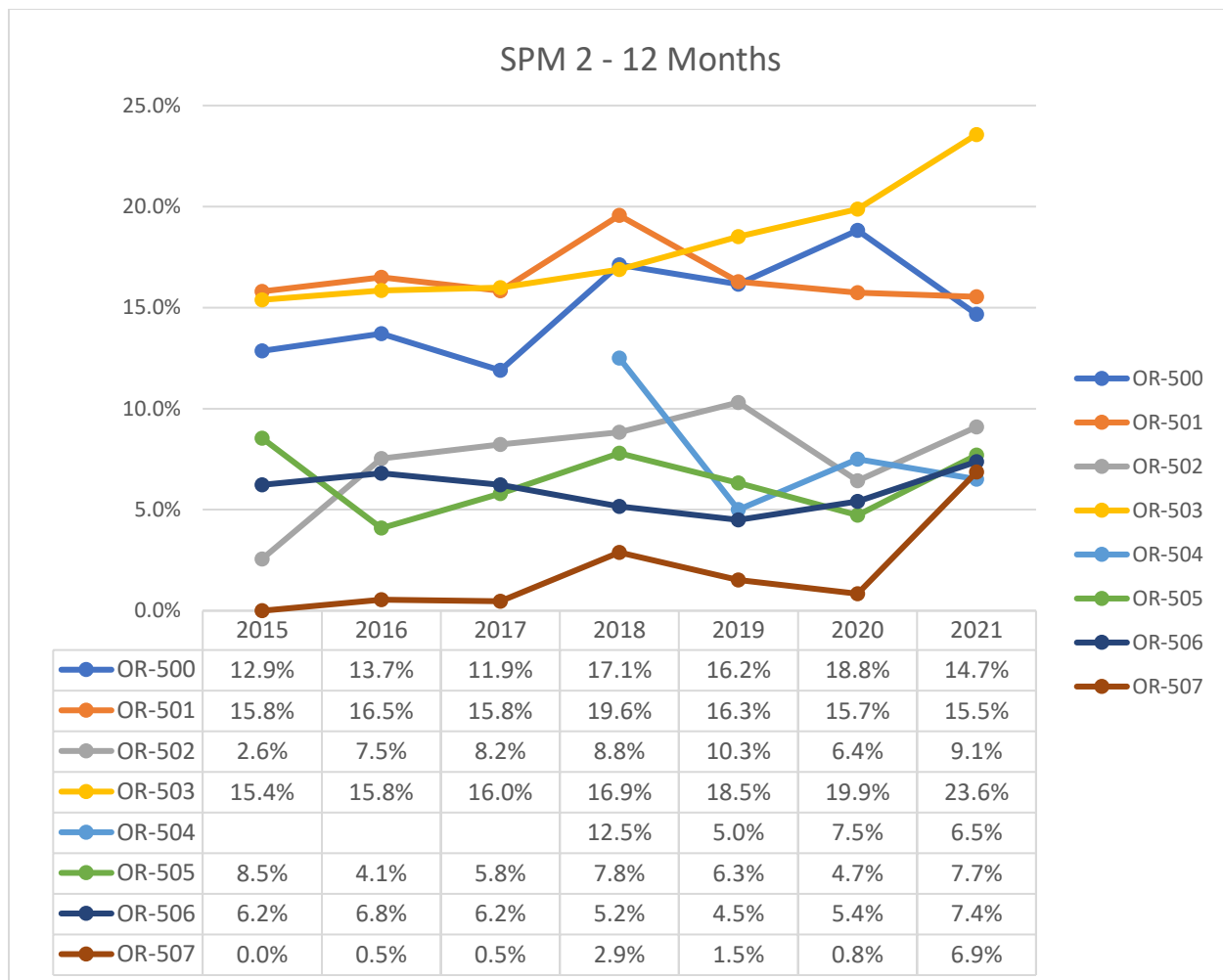
In depth analysis utilizing additional data sets would be required to do any kind of correlative or causal analysis to provide explanations for these trends. What we can readily observe is the general upwards trend in the length of stay across all CoCs, save the exception of OR-506 covering Washington County. If there were a larger share of transitional housing beds than shelter beds, we would expect the average length of stay to be higher as shelter should be a shorter intervention. Given the context that the converse is true, and shelter comprises a larger share of beds the fact that average length of stay has increased points toward people being stalled out in shelters with the averages being as high as six months.

SPM 2 Returns to Homelessness (from permanent housing)

SPM 2 looks at returns to homelessness from permanent housing and can be split out in time intervals of 6 months, 12 months, and 24 months. The data quality on this item tends to be poor as it is dependent on follow-ups by program staff, and former clients being responsive, or a person who returns to homelessness coming back into contact with the system in a way that the episode is captured in HMIS. Factors such as HMIS bed coverage will play a factor in this as someone who re-enters homelessness and goes to a shelter or program not in HMIS will not be picked up. Logically, it would be reasonable to presume that the reported figures are undercounts though we cannot say to what degree.

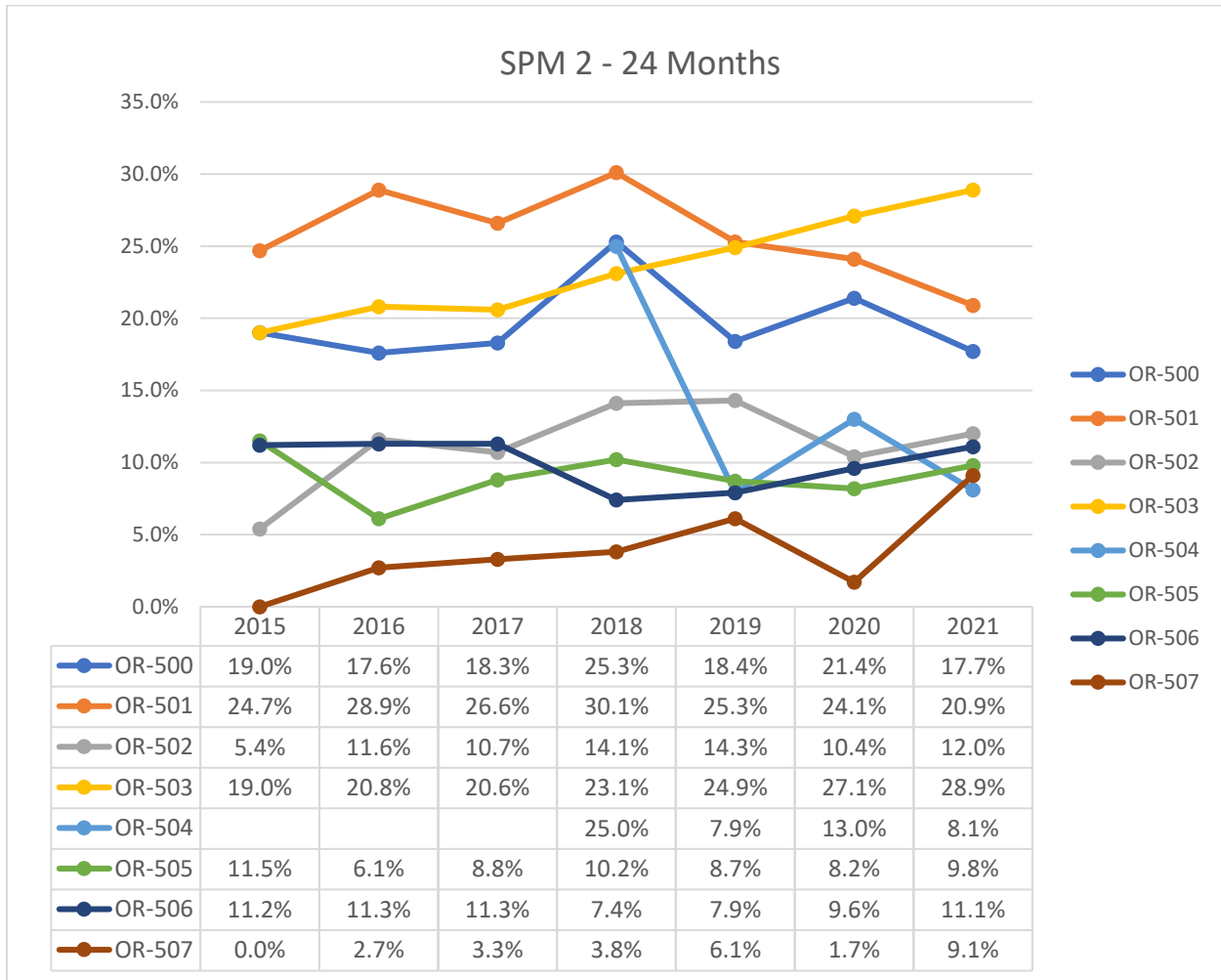


The average rate of return at 6 months across the state has been steady around 9% since 2015.



The average rate of return at 12 months has held around 13% - 14% since 2015.

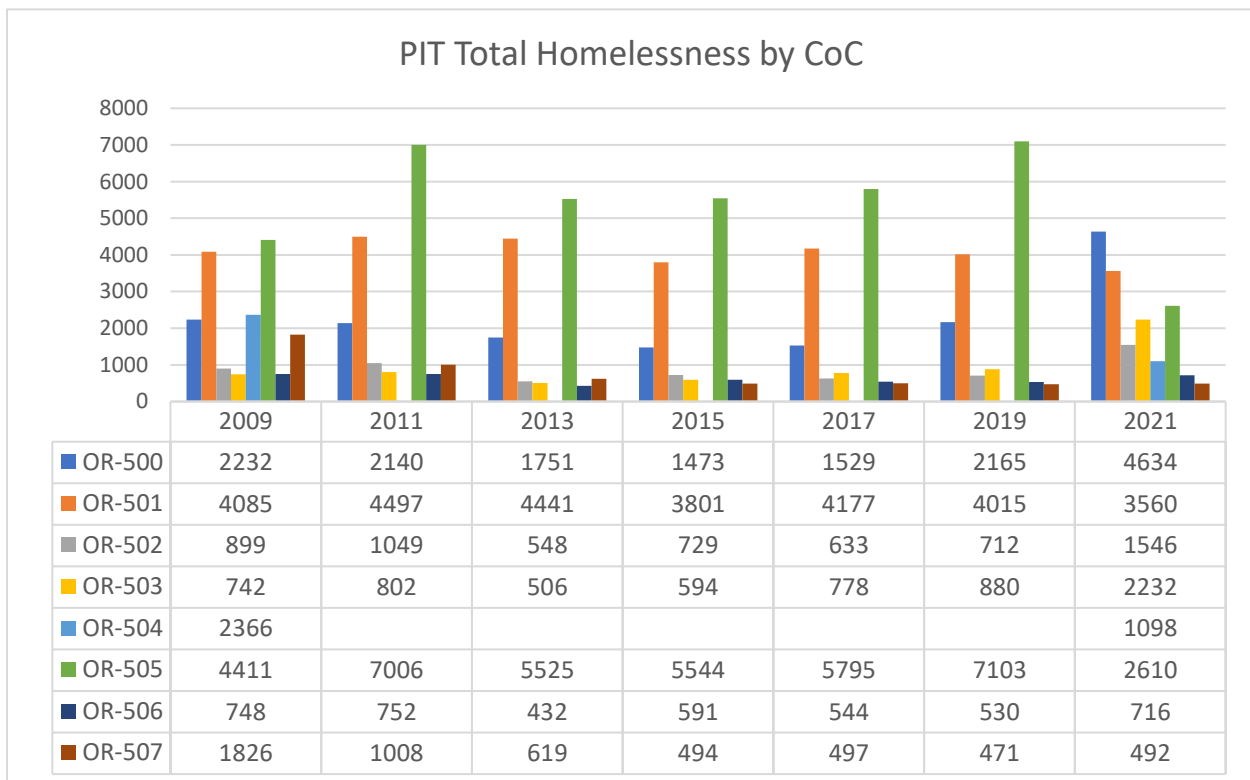
The average rate of return at 24 months holds between 18% - 20% in the timeframe.



SPM 3 Number of Homeless Persons

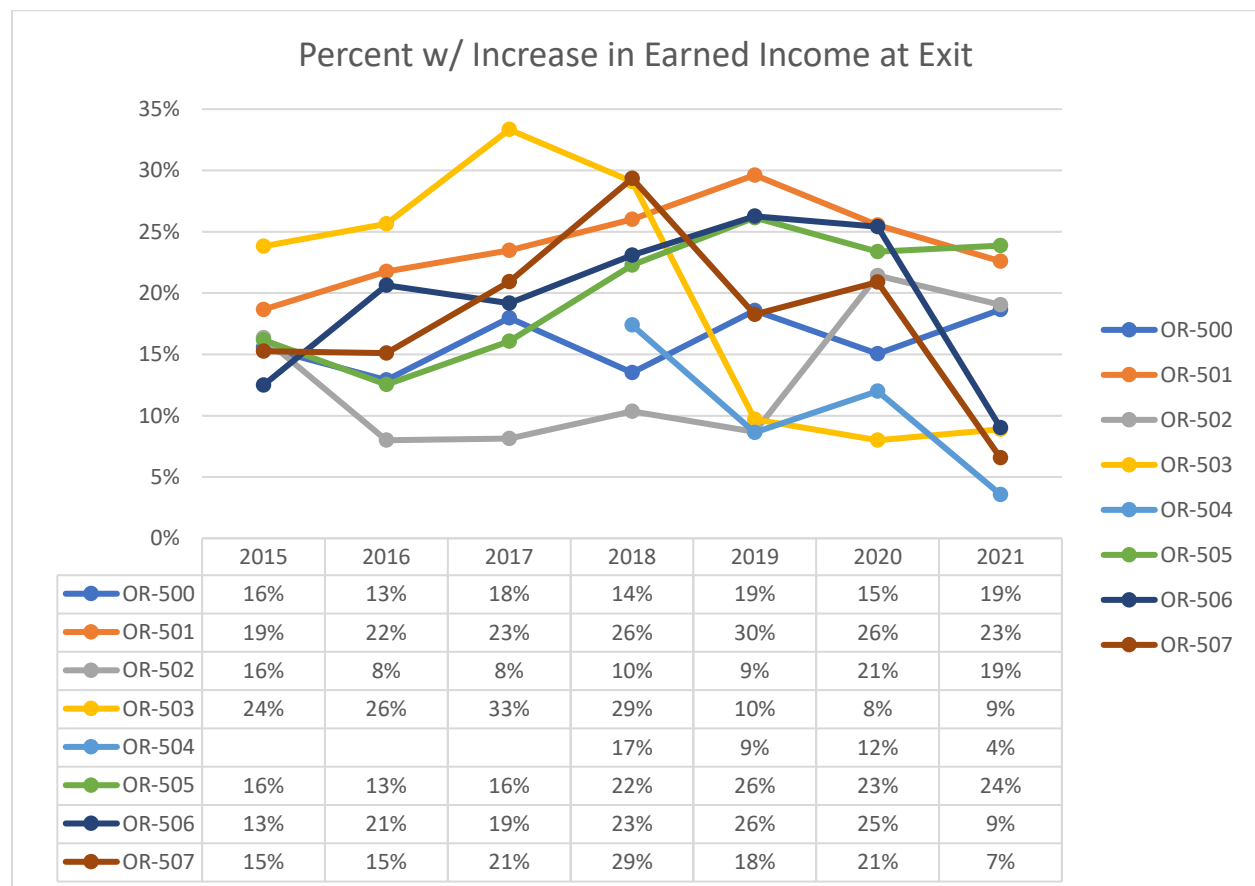
This measure simply looks at changes in the counts of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness persons. A quick look at the Point in Time (PIT) count numbers shows us that the prevalence of homelessness has not substantively changed in over a decade and is on track to hit new highs if the trending increase continues.

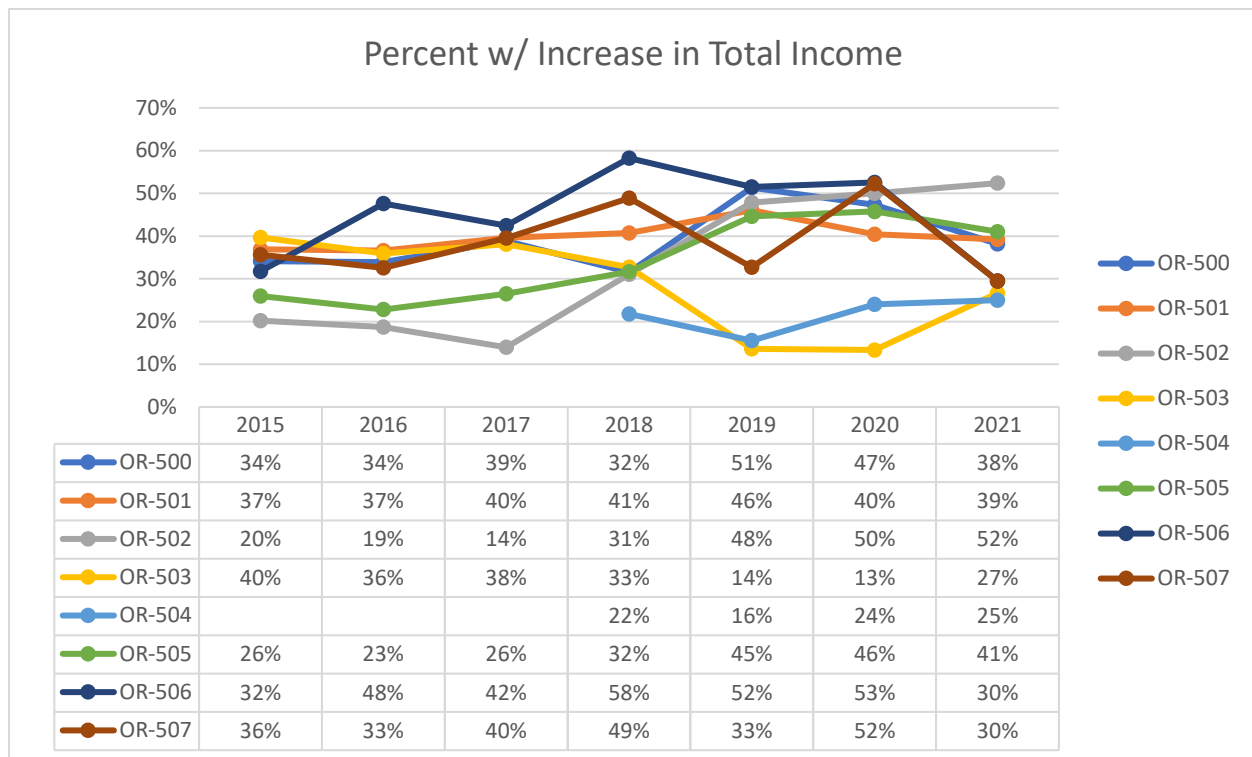
Year	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021
Total Homeless	17309	17254	13822	13226	13953	15876	16888



SPM 4 Employment and Income Growth for Homeless Persons in CoC Program-funded Projects

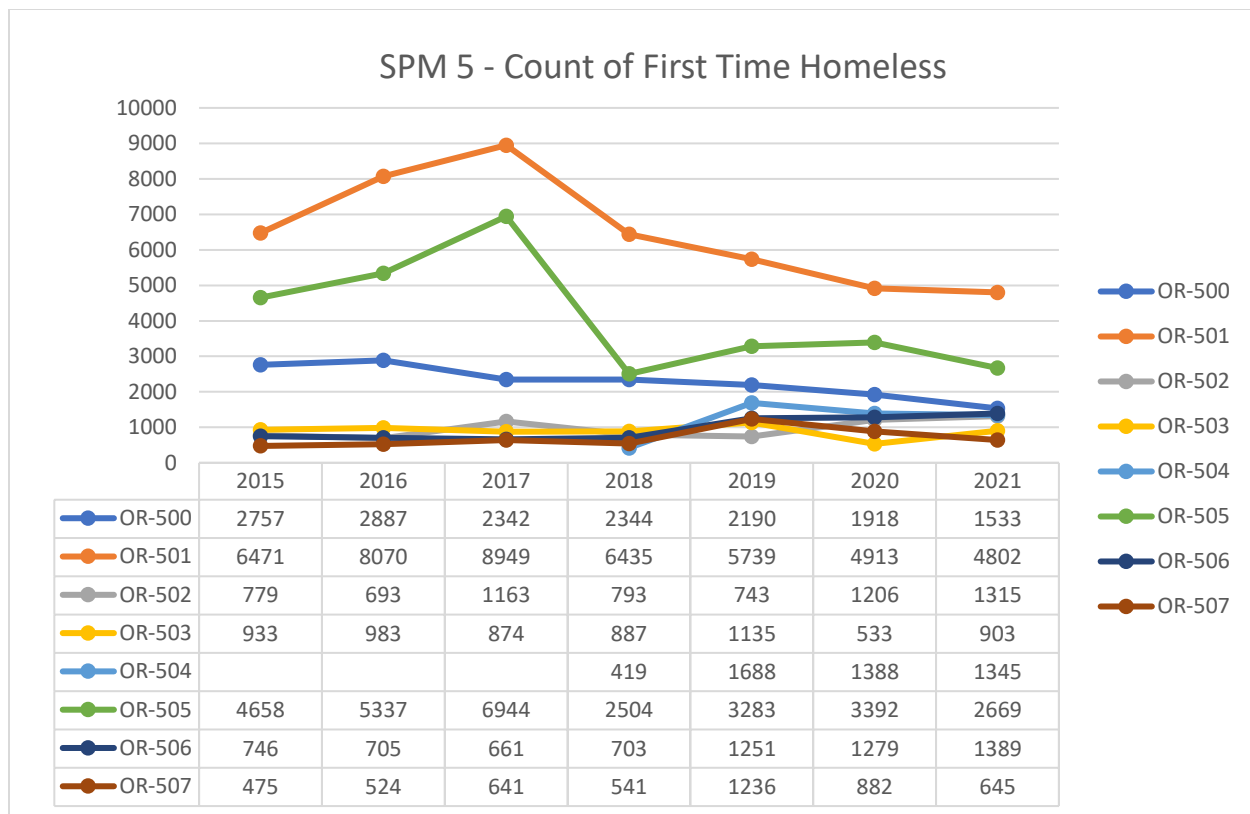
The data on this measure is notoriously unreliable and incomplete. It is unreliable to a degree that the general usefulness as an indicator of any kind is highly questionable. This is very unfortunate given the importance of gainful employment, or for those who it is truly appropriate, obtaining disability benefits income, is to being able to become maximally self-sufficient. An in-depth look at programs that receive state funding to assess if and or how they support and promote gainful employment and income growth would be well warranted. There is multiple subcomponents to this measure, but the data presented here shows the percentages of people who when exiting the program had an increase in earned income and the percent with a total increase in income, as compared with when they entered.





SPM 5 Number of Persons who Become Homeless for the First Time

The stats for this measure looking at the number of people who are experiencing homelessness for the first time does show some notable declines in the CoC covering Portland. The sharp decline for the Balance of State CoC should be treated skeptically as data older data is less reliable. Some of the decrease for the Balance of State is also a part of Marion and Polk counties splitting into their own CoC region, though as we can see this does not account for the entire shift. The CoC in Eugene OR-500 also displays a steady decline which points towards some actual progress on this front. This does raise a question regarding the large amount of state and federal dollars that was put into rental assistance, coupled with the eviction moratorium and whether or not they're related factors to declining figures on this metric through that time period.



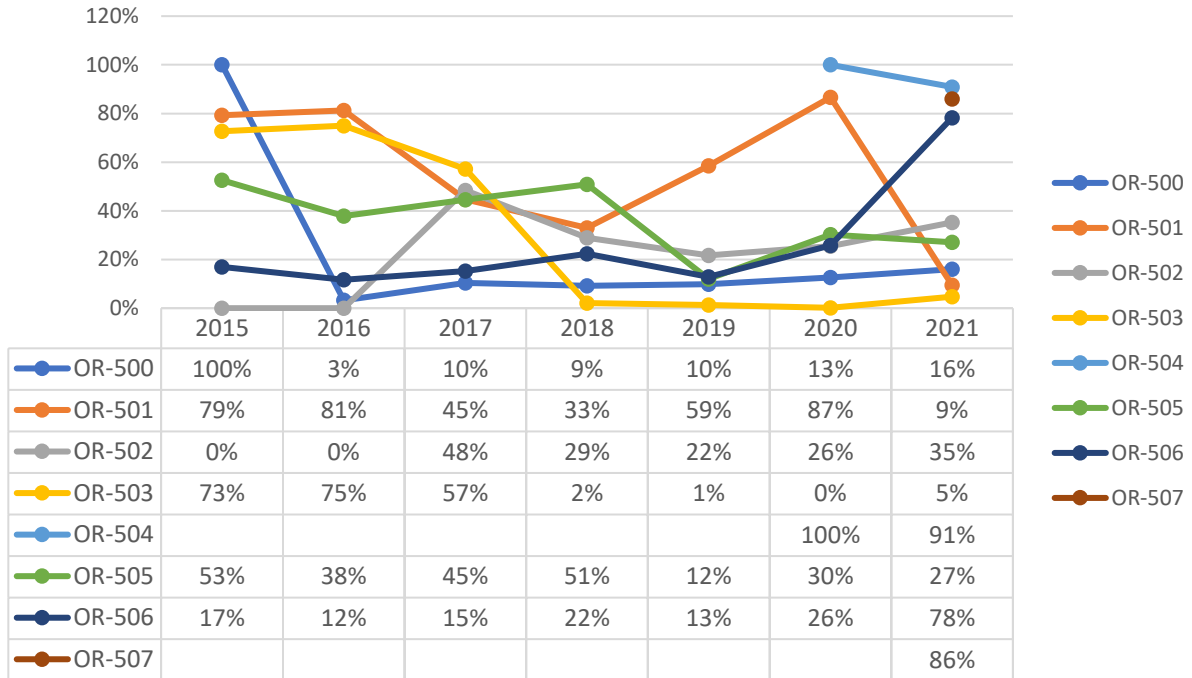
SPM 6 Homelessness Prevention and Housing Placement of Persons Defined by Category 3 of HUD's Homeless Definition in CoC Program-funded Projects

There is no data to report on this measure as no CoC in the country qualifies to provide services under this metric. It is effectively written as aspirational such that if CoCs sufficiently address homelessness in the other measures they could then provide prevention services in this metric. From HUD's guidance "Only CoC applicants that have exercised the authority and been approved by HUD to serve families with children and youth defined as homeless under other federal laws are required to complete Measures 6a, 6b, and 6c."

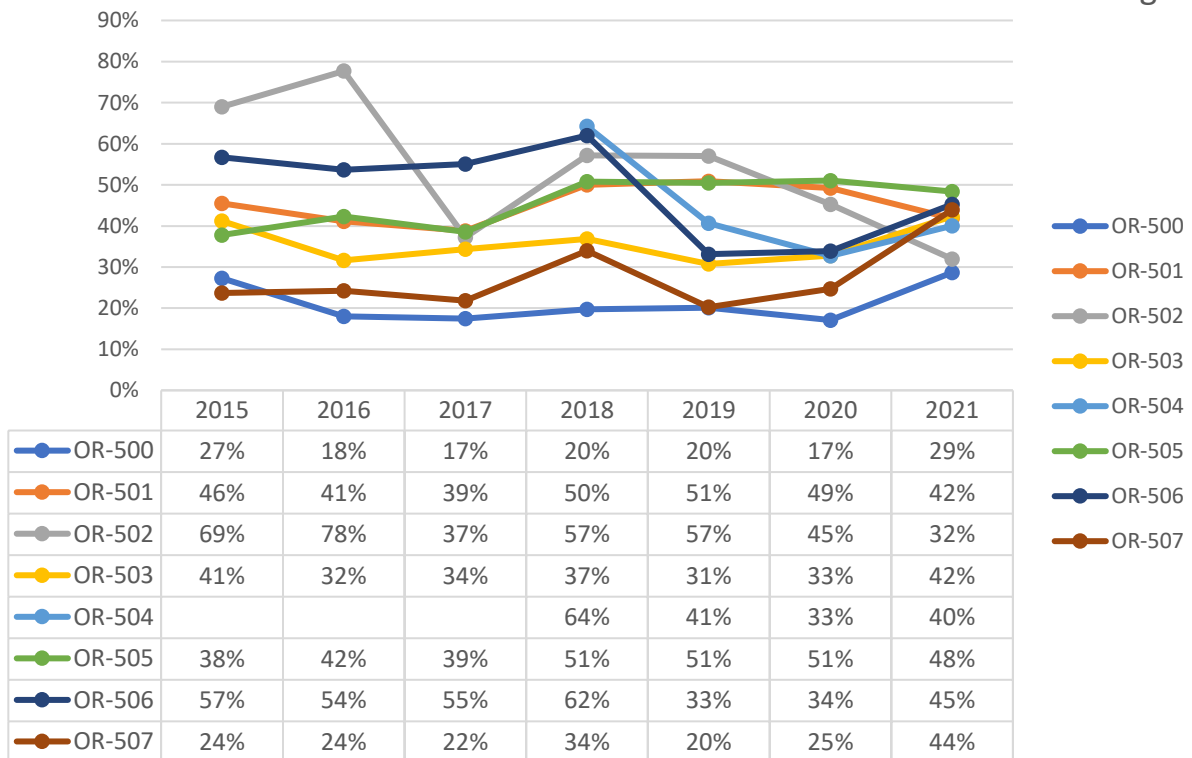
SPM 7 Successful Placement and Retention of Housing

This measure looks at exits into housing. Part a. looks at people who exited from a street outreach program to either a permanent or temporary destination. Part b. looks at people who exited from shelter, transitional housing, or rapid re-housing programs only into a permanent setting. We can clearly see that exits to permanent housing have been well below 50% in most cases for the past three years.

7a. Successful Placement from Street Outreach



7b. Successful Placement in or Retention of Permanent Housing



Summary

There is much nuance and technical detail to the measures that is not discussed here, and this level of data does not provide sufficient detail to assess any causal relationships or identify specifically what is or is not working. However, there are several insights that we can take away from the HUD SPM data. One is that HMIS is the most widely used data system for collecting and tracking information on homelessness, as such it is worth consideration as to whether investment to expand the coverage of the system amongst a broader swath of providers would be worthwhile. Alternatively, some type of arrangement for data sharing or collaboration with providers who do not use HMIS could be considered. There is also a balance to be considered between privacy and collecting sufficient data to assess the situation and what is and is not working as new policies are implemented.

We can also clearly see the decline in transitional housing and insufficient increase in supply of shelter capacity. The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress shows Oregon was effectively tied for second highest percent of unsheltered homeless at 60.6% and 8,877 unsheltered individuals. There has also been an increase in the average length of stay, which is comprised mostly of shelter beds, up to an average of at or approaching 6 months in most areas of the state. These data points combined show an unclear combination of insufficient capacity to move everyone into sheltered locations and people not moving on quickly from shelter to more permanent settings.

In the Portland area the data shows that first time homelessness has been declining while overall homeless counts have effectively held steady. This coupled with the data points just discussed points toward a more static and likely chronically homeless population in the area.

A final key takeaway from this data lies more in what is not contained here. There is no clear way to measure the prevalence of issues or efficacy of programming and by extension impact of funding just by relying on these performance measures, though if collected broadly and consistently they do provide a strong starting point. There is additional data in HMIS that can provide other insights, specifically risk assessments, but that data is not publicly available.

Section 2 State Level Performance Metrics

Funding for homelessness programs that address the components of shelter and housing currently run through Oregon Housing & Community Services (OHCS). There are a couple of performance metrics set out in legislation that covers the primary state funded programs that are focused specifically on homelessness. These legislatively defined metrics are similar to components of the HUD SPMs there is however a lack of technical specificity for these metrics and how to apply them that renders them ineffective. There are also some performance metrics under the acronym EPIC which are listed. Overall, these metrics are poorly designed, were never functionally rolled out, and have never been reported on for a variety of reasons. One of the main thrusts for deciding how programs are operated is the agency's [Statewide Housing Plan](#) which presents a variety of vague goals with no defined targets.

From the OHCS State Homeless Programs Manual: (accessible [here](#))

System Wide Performance Requirements

The Oregon Legislative Fiscal office adopted a set of criteria that agencies must meet when developing key performance measures. In alignment with the federal and state strategic plans to end homelessness, OHCS has established two performance measures:

- Increased housing stability as measured by the percentage of total program participants served who reside in permanent housing at time of exit from program; and
- Increased housing stability as measured by the percentage of program participants who at program exit reside in permanent housing and maintain permanent housing for six months from time of exit.

In addition to the current two required measures listed above, subgrantees will have the opportunity to choose additional performance measures from four categories – Ending Homelessness, Preventing Homelessness, Inclusion and Diversity, and Capacity of the Community (EPIC), as referenced in the Master Grant Agreement. The EPIC Outcomes Tool is a table listing a selection of performance measures and outcomes under each of the four headings.

Specifically referencing the [homelessness priority](#) in OHCS' Statewide Housing Plan we see there are two items which approximate metrics. One is to target that 85% of people who receive homeless services have retained permanent housing after 6 months, and the second is to end veteran's homelessness. The more technical specifications to establish actual metrics and definitions to properly evaluate progress on these goal statements does not exist. OHCS utilizes HMIS for providers to report on state funded programs as well so there is at least some consonance and ability to compare state and federal funding streams if you have access to the data, but OHCS does not publish information the way HUD does. Additionally, as we see in the HUD SPM data, the data quality for permanent housing retention is low. There is a large amount of crossover between the providers that receive federal funds and those that receive state funds, though the state is much less effective at enforcing any data quality standards. Still, we see in the SPM data that housing retention tends to stay under 50% so while an 85% target is a fine goal to move towards, it is not a realistic target on its own without additional specificity and planning on how that will be achieved. It is also important to note that historically reporting on this metric has included homelessness prevention programs where people who currently have a residence but are 'at-risk' of becoming homeless are provided financial assistance to enable them to stay where they are. This inflates the results when mixed in with people who actually move from homelessness to housing. These detailed aspects of who the programs are truly serving come into play with understanding the current reporting and what effective metrics would need to look like, so any deeper work in developing performance metrics would need to consider those factors.

The [General Assistance Program](#) operated through Department of Human Services (DHS) is targeted for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and are strong candidates for qualifying for social security disability benefits. I am not aware of any performance metrics for this program beyond trying to reach service capacity which is a capped caseload of 200 individuals (ODHS 22).

Oregon Health Authority (OHA) mentions homelessness in some of their programs and they definitely serve some of the population in a variety of ways. More recently they have been trying to move healthcare into the domain of housing, as can be seen [here](#). I have never heard

of and have not been able to find any information on performance metrics for the CCOs or other OHA programs related to homelessness. This 2016 [report](#) shows some information on housing related services that were being provided by CCOs. Looking more closely at this would likely require someone inside the agency with access to relevant data.

Section 3 Local Level Initiatives and Metrics

The largest local initiative is the Metro affordable housing bond measure that involves Multnomah, Clackamas, and Washington Counties. Part of the funds are for construction of ‘affordable housing’ units being units that have an income threshold for people to qualify for and are targeted to provide subsidized housing for lower income households. The progress reports they have available are [here](#). Per their reporting about 12% of all units are complete, another roughly 35% are under construction, and another 20% - 25% are in preconstruction, with the remaining not started. It is difficult to say what if any impact this will ultimately have on homelessness. Some of the funds are targeted more specifically towards homelessness with a focus on building permanent supportive housing targeted at the chronically homeless population. Their reporting on this component can be found [here](#). The metrics and reporting are vague, though they at least specify a target number of people that if successful would make a real difference in the prevalence of homelessness. There does not appear to be any publicly available data or technical definitions on how they are calculating these metrics so more specific analysis is not possible at this time.

The City of Portland also has a Homelessness and Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program that tracks the removal of campsites, [here](#). The drop off from a peak of 3,122 campsites removed in FY17-18 to 248 in FY20-21 is quite telling. There has been a recent increase to up over 1,000. This metric however would only serve as an indicator of a reduction or increase in homelessness if there were no camping provisions that were consistently enforced. Otherwise it serves more as an indicator of the current state of political sentiment regarding public camping.

References

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