



2027 PIT Count Volunteer Guide

A quick, practical guide for the San Diego City and County CoC Point-in-Time Count.
Please read it before count day.



Volunteers help RTFH create a one-night snapshot of unsheltered homelessness across the San Diego City and County CoC region.

WHO WE COUNT	People experiencing unsheltered homelessness: people staying in places not meant for human habitation. This guide focuses on the unsheltered count.
WHEN WE COUNT	Thursday, January 28, 2027 Morning sites: 4:00 - 8:00 a.m. Evening sites: 6:30 - 9:00 p.m. <i>Some sites may vary.</i>
WHY WE COUNT	Every person counted helps us understand local and national trends, plan for community needs, guide the allocation of resources, and meet federal reporting requirements.

5 things to remember

- 1. Stay with your team** the whole time.
- 2. Safety comes first.** If something feels unsafe, leave. In an emergency, call 911.
- 3. Always ask first.** If the person agrees, use the Unsheltered Person Survey. If not, use the Unsheltered Observation Tally survey.
- 4. Record exactly what people tell you.** Don't guess or suggest answers.
- 5. Before you leave,** submit all surveys in Drafts and return all materials.

Volunteer tip

You don't need to memorize everything. Focus on the safety guidance, the survey decision guide, and the checklists. Your site coordinator will give you site-specific instructions on count day.

Questions? pitc@rtfhdsd.org

1. Before count day

The essentials to complete before you arrive at your deployment site.

1	Register individually Every volunteer must register through the volunteer portal. If you are volunteering with a group, each person still registers separately and should select the same site if you wish to count together. Coordinate your team ahead of time, because spots can fill up fast!
2	Check your confirmation Your confirmation email includes your assigned site, address, and volunteer shift. If you don't see it, check your spam or junk folder.
3	Review site instructions At least 3 days before the count, your site coordinator should contact you with final details and instructions for your site. Emails go to the address you used to register.
4	Download and explore the Counting Us app Download Counting Us from your phone's app store before count day and open it so the screens look familiar. Follow any sign-in instructions from your site coordinator.
5	Prepare your phone Fully charge your phone and turn on location services before you arrive. The Counting Us app uses your location to record where a survey or observation happened.

What to bring

- ✓ Fully charged mobile phone- save your site coordinator's number
- ✓ Warm, comfortable clothing and good walking shoes
- ✓ Reflective clothing, if available
- ✓ A personal flashlight, if you have one (some sites provide flashlights, depending on supplies)
- ✓ A vehicle, if you are comfortable driving an assigned census tract

Only registered volunteers should attend

Site capacity and team assignments are based on registrations. Please don't bring an unregistered friend to the count.

2. What to expect on count day

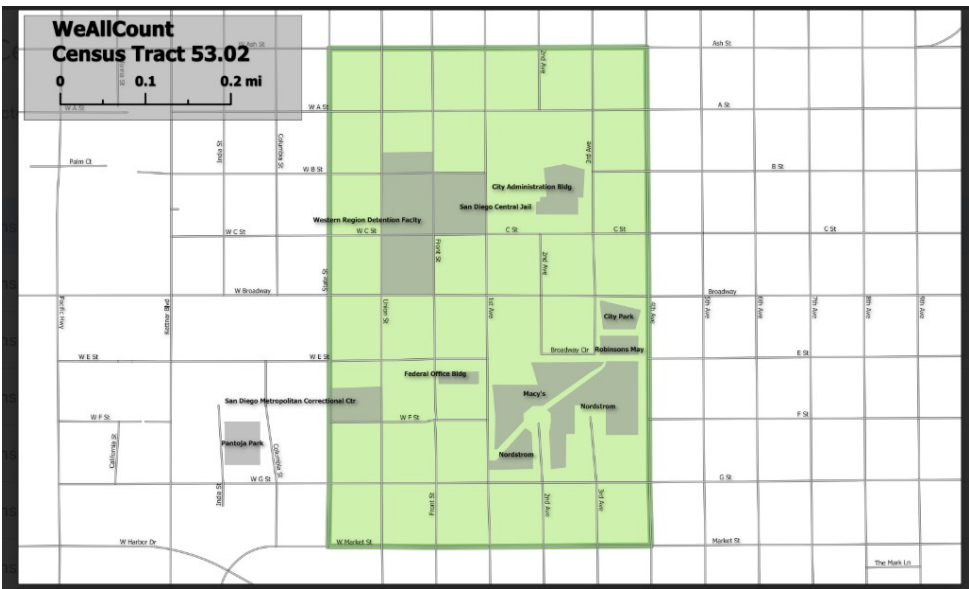
Your site coordinator will make final assignments based on your registration and give site-specific directions.

MORNING DEPLOYMENT	Most morning sites run 4:00–8:00 a.m. Volunteers generally arrive about 30 minutes early to check in, meet their team, and receive materials. Some sites use different hours.
EVENING SITE-BASED COUNT	Safe Parking and Safe Sleeping sites generally begin at 6:30 p.m. and finish when the site count is complete, no later than the assigned end time.

Your volunteer team

Teams are typically 3–4 people. Depending on your team, you may take on one or more of these roles:

- **Drive:** Move the team safely through the assigned census tract.
- **Navigate:** Use the census tract map to keep the team within its assigned boundaries.
- **Interview:** Enter responses in the Counting Us app.
- **Supplies:** Help hand out approved incentives such as gift cards and socks.



Your team will receive a map showing the census tract boundaries you are assigned to cover.

A zero count is still useful

If your team thoroughly covers an assigned tract and finds no one to survey or observe, that is still important data. Don't create an observation just to record activity.

3. Safety comes first

No survey is worth putting yourself or your team in an unsafe situation.

Immediate danger

If there is an immediate threat to life or safety, leave the area and call 911.

Do

- ✓ Stay with your volunteer group.
- ✓ Keep a conversational distance.
- ✓ Stay aware of your surroundings and your footing.
- ✓ Keep your phone accessible and charged.
- ✓ End an interaction if conditions become unsafe.

Do not enter or continue

- ✗ Areas with active police activity
- ✗ Areas with gang activity
- ✗ Dark or secluded spaces that feel unsafe
- ✗ Areas with only one entry or exit
- ✗ Any interaction that becomes hostile or aggressive

A respectful approach

Introduce yourself and explain that you are volunteering with a community effort to count people experiencing homelessness.

- Participation is voluntary. Encourage but don't pressure anyone to answer questions ("Client Refused" is also a response option).
- Use a calm tone and nonjudgmental body language.
- If someone declines, thank them and move on to the observation process when appropriate.
- Survey information is confidential and shared only with RTFH staff.

Simple introduction

"Hello, my name is [name]. I'm a volunteer conducting this year's homeless count. Would you be willing to answer a few questions?"

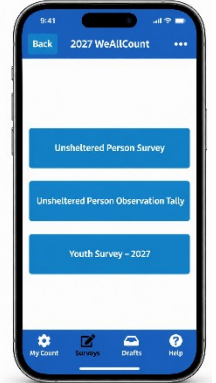
4. Which survey do I use?

General volunteers will use two surveys in the Counting Us app. Download it from your phone's app store. See [How-to Guide](#).

Note: The Youth Survey is only for Youth Count volunteers, who will receive separate guidance.

Did the person agree to participate?

YES	Use the Unsheltered Person Survey. Eligible if the person is in an unsheltered situation. Record their exact answers. Full and partial interviews both count as engagements.
NO, CAN'T RESPOND, OR NOT SAFE TO APPROACH	Use the Unsheltered Observation Tally survey. Use only when a person was physically observed. Record immediately obvious visual information and explain why an interview was not completed.



What is an unsheltered situation?

- Living in a vehicle, boat, or RV
- Living outside in a park
- Living on the streets
- Living within an encampment
- In an abandoned building
- On a bus or at a train station
- Airport
- Campground
- Parking lot (for example, a Safe Parking program)

How to Record Households

One household survey can include multiple members

Select Household in the app, enter the number of members, and answer questions for each person. A participating member may report an eligible household member who was absent but unsheltered on count night. Incentives are only for people present who complete a survey.

In the app, choose Household, then enter the number of people in the household.

5. Common field situations

Use these quick steps when an interaction is less straightforward.

If someone is asleep

- Approach politely as a group and greet the person.
- Explain why you are there before asking questions.
- If they agree, begin the **Unsheltered Person Survey**.
- If they decline, thank them and complete an **Unsheltered Observation Tally survey** when appropriate.

People living in vehicles

1	Look for signs of habitation Examples include fogged or covered windows, visible belongings, electrical connections, lights, generators, or other signs that the vehicle is being used as a living space.
2	Confirm before counting People are counted, not vehicles. If safe, knock once and ask where the person slept on count night. RV occupants need additional assessment; see the RV checklist on the next page.
3	Collect the data If eligible and willing, complete the Unsheltered Person Survey. If an interview cannot be completed, use the Unsheltered Observation Tally survey only when a person has been physically observed and the observation criteria are met. See the instructions below.



People are counted, not vehicles.

When using the Unsheltered Observation Tally survey

In the Counting Us app, select “**Vehicle / Boat / RV**” as the location. You will then be asked whether you visually observed the person sleeping in their vehicle. Select “**Yes**” **only if you actually saw the person sleeping**.

Then describe the person's vehicle: Include visible details such as the vehicle type, color, condition, and any distinguishing features, for potential follow-up purposes.

5. RV assessment and engagement (continued)

RVs need added assessment: sleeping in an RV does not always qualify as unsheltered homelessness.

1	Look for signs someone is inside Covered windows, lights, generators, or belongings may indicate occupancy. These signs alone are not enough to count someone.
2	Introduce yourself and confirm the living situation If safe, knock once and ask permission to talk. Confirm they are experiencing homelessness and not simply traveling through San Diego.
3	Record the survey accurately If eligible and willing, complete the Unsheltered Person Survey. For RV engagements, select "RV" as the vehicle type and select RV condition(s) as part of the survey.

6. Recording answers correctly

Good data depends on recording what the participant tells you, not what you think the answer should be.

1	Use self-report Record the exact answer the person gives.
2	Clarify without leading You may reword a question or give an example if the participant is confused. Don't suggest the answer you expect.
3	Don't leave required fields blank Use options such as "Client Refused" or "Client Doesn't Know" when appropriate.
4	Review before submitting You can correct answers before the final submit step. Check the Drafts area for surveys that still need to be submitted.

Okay: clarify

"Do you have a physical disability, such as a vision impairment?"

Avoid: leading

"You have a physical disability, right?"

Participant incentives

Your site may provide gift cards and socks to eligible participants. Follow your site coordinator's instructions. If someone asks whether they'll get anything, tell them they may be eligible for a gift card and socks, then wait to see if they qualify.

Return all materials at the end of your shift

- ✓ Unused gift cards and socks
- ✓ Flashlights and safety vests provided by the site
- ✓ Volunteer bags
- ✓ Census tract maps

7. Count day at a glance

A quick recap, in order.

1	Before you leave home Charge your phone, turn on location services, dress for the weather, and review your site confirmation.
2	Check site messages In the Counting Us app, open My Count, select your assignment, and review the site Bulletin Board for updates or reminders.
3	At check-in Meet your site coordinator, join your team, receive your map and materials, and confirm your assignment.
4	While counting Stay with your team, put safety first, cover your assigned census tracts, and use the correct survey form.
5	Count wrap-up Stop counting and return to your count site by the assigned end time. Return materials, check Drafts in the Counting Us app, and submit completed surveys.

Frequently asked questions

Can minors volunteer?

Yes. Volunteers under 18 must be registered and have written parent or legal guardian consent using the 2027 Minor Release Form.

What if it rains?

The count happens rain or shine. If a natural disaster prevents the count from moving forward, RTFH will contact volunteers.

Can I bring a friend?

Only if your friend is also a registered volunteer assigned to the site.

Why so early?

Early morning hours help teams count people when they are most likely to be in their usual nighttime location. Site-based programs count in the evening to match their operating hours.

For additional FAQ questions, please review the [2027 WeAllCount FAQs](#).

Need help?

PIT Count questions: pitc@rtfhdsd.org