

CANADIAN OBSERVATORY ON HOMELESSNESS

DISCUSSION PAPER

USE OF HONORARIA IN POINT-IN-TIME COUNTS



Canadian
Observatory on
Homelessness

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Introduction

Honoraria are tokens that acknowledge the time and contributions provided by research participants.

Communities that conduct Point-in-Time Counts offer honoraria to participants, including money, gift cards, granola bars, backpacks, clothing, blankets, and other items detailed in this paper. The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness has previously commented on the use of honoraria in the [Point-in-Time Count Toolkit](#).

The following is a discussion paper on the use of honoraria in Point-in-Time Counts. Communities will have varying levels of resources when planning and conducting PiT Counts; we suggest that you use the following as a guide and adapt it to meet your local needs.

Our Position

Informed consent is a key principle in any research and ensures subjects are well informed about the potential risks and benefits of participation. However, consent is compromised if a person feels coerced into participating. Honoraria are not to be used to incentivize people experiencing homelessness to participate in a Point-in-Time Count. Rather, honoraria should recognize and thank participants for their time and contributions.

The value of honoraria should be determined based on the nature of the research. PiT Count surveys are short (approximately 5-10 minutes in length) and relatively non-invasive; therefore honoraria should be scaled appropriately.

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) recommends that Point-in-Time Count honoraria should have a value of approximately \$5, and should never exceed a value of \$10. Whenever possible, we encourage communities to use cash or gift cards. If you are using items such as granola bars, socks and personal care items instead of or in addition to financial honoraria, we recommend keeping the total value to less than \$20.

This discussion paper was prepared by Ilyana Keohane, Communications Officer and Jesse Donaldson, National Point-in-Time Count Coordinator. It is based on learning from communities that participated in the 2016 Coordinated Count, led by the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy.

Considerations

BUDGET

Although PiT counts are an important investment, implementing a count should not be financially prohibitive. Honoraria should be distributed to all participants who screen into the survey, not just those who complete the survey. Therefore, you will need to budget for a sufficient number of honoraria. An honorarium in excess of \$10 puts increased pressure on other communities who are implementing counts with limited financial resources.

As recommended in the [HPS Guide to Point-in-Time Counts in Canada](#), soliciting donations from local businesses can help to keep your PiT Count within budget, and allow for greater variety of honoraria. Encourage business to donate gift cards or additional items such as food, clothing or personal care items. Some businesses may be willing to make a cash donation.

SAFETY

During a PiT Count, the safety of both volunteers and participants should be priority. By keeping honoraria to a maximum of \$10, you minimize the potential risk of volunteers carrying large sums of cash, especially at night. This is not to suggest that participating in a PiT Count is inherently dangerous; in any circumstance people may feel uncomfortable carrying and distributing larger sums of money after dark. If you choose to use cash honoraria or gift cards – as encouraged by the COH - ensure your teams of volunteers are carrying reasonable amounts. Additional honoraria can be delivered during the count if teams find themselves short.

DUPLICATION

During a PiT Count, efforts should be made to reduce the likelihood that individuals will be counted more than once. One consequence of providing high value honoraria is the increased risk of duplication. Honoraria in excess of \$10 may increase the likelihood that participants will complete the survey more than once.

Some communities opt to use an engagement gift instead of or in addition to honoraria. Engagement gifts are small value items, such as granola bars, given out prior to asking the screening questions. Providing engagement gifts may reduce incentives for participants to complete the survey more than once, as receipt of the engagement gift is not dependent on participation.

Communities should consult with individuals with lived experience on the types of honoraria that may be valued by PiT Count participants.

ETHICS

Common ethics protocol dictates that research participants must make informed decisions about their involvement. Previous studies ([Singer and Bossarte, 2006](#)) have suggested that cash honoraria, or *remuneration*, has a potentially coercive power that can invalidate informed consent.

Evidence from academic research indicates that there are two schools of thought on this issue; firstly, that cash honoraria can be coercive. Economically vulnerable people may feel compelled to participate in research where there is financial compensation. As stated in the [York University Guidelines for Conducting Research with People who are Homeless](#): “people who are homeless are by definition a marginalized population that routinely experiences exploitation”. Some argue that the use of cash honoraria contributes to the exploitation of marginalized peoples by inadvertently incentivizing them to participate in research. Conversely, [McKeganey \(2001\)](#) argues that that researchers are generally being paid for their involvement in research therefore it is unfair to not to pay respondents for their time and contributions.

Ultimately, with both arguments in mind, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness supports the use of cash or gift cards as honoraria. Participants should be fairly remunerated for their contributions and one of the clearest means to do so is through cash or gift cards.

Further Discussion

GIFT CARDS & CASH

During the 2016 Coordinated PiT Count, over 50% of communities used coffee/grocery gift cards as honoraria. Gift cards are lightweight, so they are easy for volunteers to transport, and a good way to engage local businesses for donations.

However, it is worth noting that although gift cards are a popular choice, some have highlighted that the use of gift cards instead of cash denies participants choice and agency over how to spend their remuneration ([Collins et al., 2017](#); [Ensign, 2003](#)).

With this in mind, some researchers use cash instead of gift cards, a decision the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness supports. If so, remember the aforementioned considerations around budget, safety, ethics, and risk of survey duplication. Financial remuneration should be appropriately scaled to the time required by participants.

OTHER ITEMS

Some communities opt to use non-monetary items instead of or in addition to cash or gift cards. If your budget allows, the PiT Count provides a good opportunity to provide participants with basic necessities such as winter clothing, granola bars, band-aids, condoms, toothbrushes, toothpaste, razors, other toiletries, and transit tokens/tickets. Some consider this approach adequate given that the PiT Count survey is generally short, anonymous and minimally invasive.

Conversely, some do not view these items alone as sufficient compensation for research participation, instead favouring the use cash or gift cards. As you consult with individuals with lived experience, service providers and other researchers consider the following:

- *How long is your PiT Count survey?*
- *Are the questions minimally invasive?*
- *What has been used in previous PiT Counts?*
- *What has been used in other research?*
- *Are you conducting any complementary studies (a registry week, optional youth questions, etc.)?*

IDEAS FOR HONORARIA & COMPLEMENTARY ITEMS

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

In some Indigenous populations, the sharing of tobacco is considered a sign of respect. Consult with community leaders, experts and Indigenous Peoples with lived experience to determine whether this may be an appropriate token of appreciation in your community.

YOUTH

Some youth avoid shelters, and as a result may not have access to hot meals, warm clothing, laundry, bathing facilities, and other services that shelters provide. Grocery cards, transit tokens and prepaid phone cards may be popular among young people. Also consider using your PiT Count as an outreach opportunity to youth of youth-based services in your community.

PEOPLE WHO MENSTRUATE

For people who menstruate, it can be difficult to access tampons, pads and other hygiene products while homeless. Though shelters sometimes provide free pads, those who don't regularly go to shelters and services have limited options. Local stores and health clinics may be willing to donate sanitary items ahead of the count.

CIGARETTES AS HONORARIA

In the 2016 Coordinated Count, two communities used cigarettes as honoraria, a practice that is seen by some as controversial. On the one hand, an [evaluation of smoking practises used by people experiencing homelessness](#) found that providing fresh, unadulterated, "clean" cigarettes can reduce some potentially high-risk smoking habits, such as cigarette sharing and using discarded cigarette butts and filters. Yet, offering an addictive and increasingly expensive product to the economically disadvantaged can be considered unethical, and research suggests that the majority of smokers who are homeless [are interested in quitting](#).

If you choose to use cigarettes, ensure that volunteers are properly trained on how to distribute them respectfully. Some volunteers may feel uncomfortable providing cigarettes however, as per the [York University Guidelines for Conducting Research with People who are Homeless](#), research with people who are homeless must be conducted in a non-judgemental way, and researchers must not contribute to the marginalization of homeless persons through acting in a way that is judgemental regarding an individual's personal habits. Ensure you share this information with volunteers.

Do not provide youth participants with cigarettes. It is illegal to sell, give, buy for, lend or otherwise provide tobacco products to anyone under the age of 18 in most Canadian provinces and territories, and in B.C. and Ontario that age has been raised to 19. Additionally, in provinces including Alberta, minors caught carrying or consuming tobacco products can be fined up to \$100.

Beyond Honoraria

RESOURCE CARDS

A PiT Count is a good opportunity to connect people with services, resources and supports. Develop a resource card that includes contact information for educational supports, income support, housing, emergency services, health services, LGBTQ2S services, Indigenous services, Veterans Affairs Canada, crisis centres, and substance use services. Ask local service providers and individuals with lived experience for suggestions on what to include.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE COUNT

It is important to provide participants with information about the count. Consider creating an information card with a brief description of the count, its purpose, how the results will be used and where the findings will be available. Provide contact details for the PiT Count Coordinator so participants can follow-up with questions, comments or concerns.

For more information about Point-in-Time Counts and honoraria contact:

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Veterans experiencing homelessness may be entitled to assistance from Veterans Affairs Canada. At a minimum, provide survey participants with the contact details for the VAC Assistance Service. Veterans can reach mental health professionals 24 hours a day by calling 1-800-268-7708. For more information, including brochures, posters and materials available for download, go to veterens.gc.ca.