

Counting Homeless Youth

Promising Practices from the Youth Count! Initiative

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Homelessness is devastating for young people. They often can't attend school, let alone graduate. They experience high rates of violence, sexual assault, physical illness, and behavioral disorders. To cope, many engage in drug use, prostitution, survival sex, or other illicit activities.

Knowing how many youth are homeless is a critical first step in helping them, but it's not easy to count a hidden population. Nine communities across the United States set out to improve their counts through the Youth Count! Initiative. The Urban Institute observed their work and drew out promising practices and lessons for improvement.

Why Is It Important to Count?

We don't know how many youth are currently homeless. Not knowing the true size of the population makes it hard to measure progress in ending and preventing homelessness. Data collection that accompanies counts can provide a clearer picture of the characteristics and subgroups of homeless youth, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth, to better tailor services to their distinct needs.

Why Is It So Hard to Get an Accurate Count?

Government and nonprofit estimates of the number of homeless youth vary widely, from tens of thousands to over a million. Part of the difficulty is that different counts use different age ranges and definitions of homelessness. Also, methods often used for counting homeless adults don't accurately capture survival strategies common to youth, such as being mobile and

transient, latching onto friends and staying in groups, or trying to hide in plain sight.

Add to that the fact that many homeless youth don't want to be found. They may be fleeing abuse or fear being placed in foster care. Most aren't connected to formal supports such as the child welfare, juvenile justice, and mental health systems, and many avoid or are unaware of available services.

What Is the Youth Count! Initiative?

The Obama administration has pledged to end homelessness for children, youth, and families by 2020. As part of that broader strategy, four federal agencies¹ launched Youth Count! to improve counts of unaccompanied homeless youth—those not connected to their families. Nine sites participated in the pilot. Boston conducted its point-in-time count in December 2012, the rest in January 2013.

The sites used various strategies, including conducting surveys, expanding their coverage areas to include places where youth congregate, involving housed and homeless youth in the counts, and coordinating with schools. Five sites held magnet events with free meals and activities to draw in youth who don't use shelters or can't be located on the street. Many sites also engaged LGBTQ service providers in the counts.

Nine Youth Count! sites

- Boston, MA
- Cleveland, OH
- Hennepin County, MN
- Houston, TX
- Los Angeles, CA
- New York City, NY
- King County/Seattle, WA
- Washington State
- Winston-Salem, NC

Promising Practices

Through pre- and post-count interviews, observations during the count, and document review, the Urban Institute evaluated the pilot sites' strategies to examine how their experiences might guide future efforts. Some promising practices stood out.

- **Engage youth service providers.** These partnerships create opportunities to improve service delivery to homeless youth.
- **Engage LGBTQ partners.** Much can be learned from these service providers, particularly about how to find LGBTQ homeless youth, promote the count within the LGBTQ community, and create an environment where LGBTQ youth feel welcome.

1. The US Interagency Council on Homelessness, the Department of Education, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration on Children, Youth and Families.

- **Involve youth.** Youth were particularly helpful in pretesting and advising on the survey design, acting as outreach workers or guides to find homeless youth, and engaging homeless youth in the count.
- **Hold magnet events.** On the whole, magnet events successfully brought youth in to participate in the count. But they largely attracted homeless youth that were already connected to services, like shelters.
- **Use social media to raise awareness and outreach.** Data from other studies indicate that even youth living on the street use social media. It's unclear how effectively social media reached youth, but some count organizers felt that homeless youth used social media to spread the word about the count, leading to a larger-than-expected turnout at magnet events.
- **Measure housing instability, not homelessness.** Sites that asked survey questions about housing status were better able to measure broader definitions of homelessness. This allows communities to identify larger needs, beyond shelter alone.

Room for Improvement

Through site observations and interviews, we also found common themes for improvement.

- **Expand coverage.** Street counts could be improved by looking beyond known hot spots where youth gather to include areas selected at random.
- **Survey everyone or a representative sample.** The eight sites that surveyed youth were inconsistent in whom they picked to participate. In some sites, counters picked people to survey based on appearances, but most homeless youth look like their non-homeless peers. Sites that use a survey focused on housing status and who tell counters to approach everyone who looks the right age may end up with a more representative sample.
- **Determine the best survey.** Sites developed their own surveys, which led to inconsistent wordings, lengths, and protocols. More consistency is needed to reach a national estimate. Also, sites should pretest their surveys to identify the best wording, examine the effects of the survey length, and determine what type of training counters need.
- **Engage schools.** Sites had various degrees of success including schools in Youth Count! The data that schools use to identify homeless youth for school enrollment purposes should not be used for point-in-time counts, but schools can be important partners and should be engaged to help conduct outreach and raise awareness about the count.
- **Improve outreach for magnet events.** Future events should focus on attracting populations that aren't already connected to youth or homeless services.
- **Avoid duplicate counts to prevent overestimating the number of homeless youth.** Efforts should include methods to prevent counting the same youth twice. Technical assistance could help sites identify homeless youth who have already been counted.
- **Improve training and quality control.** Training sessions should include a comprehensive curriculum and should require counters to practice interviews. Also,

future counts should include quality control procedures, such as observing counters at random intervals.

- **Add a post-count debrief.** After completing a count, sites should gather feedback from counters, service providers, and other participants. That feedback should be used to improve future counts.

Recommendations

We advise improving HUD's point-in-time counts of the homeless, which help shelters identify need, by focusing on homeless youth through magnet events and expanded coverage, and creating partnerships with schools, homeless youth providers, and those serving LGBTQ youth.

We also recommend launching a national study on the characteristics of homeless youth. Possible methods include a school-based survey of all students and a survey of youth who use homeless shelters and other services, or a respondent-driven survey—where homeless youth receive incentives for referring others—that can reach hard-to-find youth and can provide estimates about subgroups (e.g., the share of homeless youth who are LGBTQ or who are couch surfing). In addition, policymakers should consider using existing national surveys to count doubled-up or couch-surfing youth.

If improved strategies are taken to scale nationwide, future counts may produce more accurate and useful data on the size and scope of the homeless youth population—taking us a step closer to preventing and ending homelessness. ▪

For more information: www.urban.org/counting-homeless-youth

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For more information about each of the nine sites, details about planning and implementation, and detailed recommendations, see the full Youth Count! process study at www.urban.org/publications/412872.html.

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