



Promising Practices for Counting Youth Experiencing Homelessness in the Point-in-Time Counts*

Each year, Continuums of Care (CoC) conduct counts of persons who are homeless in their communities at the end of January. While conducting PIT counts for persons experiencing homelessness has always presented a unique set of challenges, communities have found it particularly difficult to identify youth experiencing homelessness. Often this is because youth experiencing homelessness congregate in different locations and at different times than older adults, youth often do not want to be found, and youth do not often think of themselves as being homeless. In the past several years, many communities have recognized these challenges and have concentrated resources, put forth extra effort, and improved their ability to find and engage youth experiencing homelessness. This document outlines several promising practices that these communities have implemented for their PIT counts.

Have A Strong Leadership Team: A PIT Count is successful only when the entire community is informed, involved, and ready to help. A strong leadership team should be ready to overcome barriers, engage relevant community stakeholders, and help facilitate coordination and action locally. Having buy-in from leadership clearly communicates that finding and assisting youth experiencing homelessness is a priority for the community

Get Youth Input Early and Often: Youth are the experts. Communities that want to most accurately count youth, and subsequently serve them, need to have youth at the table beginning with planning and throughout the entire counting experience. Communities have done this in different ways. Some communities have found a single champion among their youth who is willing to be a regular participant in counting opportunities, while others have created youth advisory teams. Other communities regularly convene youth focus groups where youth who are currently or formerly experienced homelessness talk about their unique experiences and provide insights about the best times and places to find youth experiencing homelessness. Regular consultation with youth allows communities to develop outreach and training materials that are youth-inclusive, culturally sensitive, and accurately representative of the experiences of homeless youth in the community.

Partner with the Youth Service Community: The CoC should build relationships with individual service providers and local “gatekeepers.” These partners often have a wealth of experience serving youth experiencing homelessness and want to help find and serve them. These service providers often have the best knowledge about how and where to conduct outreach efforts. There are many stakeholders involved in providing child and youth services. This certainly includes schools, youth shelters, drop-in centers, libraries, community centers, afterschool programs, affordable housing developers, youth employment programs, faith-based groups, food banks, parks, child welfare workers, law enforcement officials, and juvenile justice workers. It is particularly important that CoCs engage local homeless education liaisons in every phase of the PIT count process. Just as youth need to be at the table as soon as possible, these stakeholders should be included in the PIT count planning process and be regular partners in the PIT count experience. These relationships should extend beyond the PIT count as well, to ensure there is a coordinated effort to find and serve youth all year long.

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Designate a Youth PIT Count Coordinator: Many communities have designated a single person to coordinate the youth PIT count effort. This person does not need to be a content expert but is organized and cares about the cause. Given all of the coordination involved in conducting a successful youth PIT count, it is crucial that the CoC has a person who can keep a clear focus on coordinating partners and can manage the many steps necessary to conduct the count. Some communities have used their general PIT count coordinator to serve this function, while others have sought a volunteer from among their partners willing to fulfill this role. Communities have asked interns to serve in this role as well, but it is important to ensure the intern has enough support and authority from appropriate agencies to be able to execute count coordination.

Address the Issue of the Stigma of Homelessness: Being identified as homeless creates a stigma that most people – including youth – are anxious to avoid. Public engagement about conducting the PIT count and activities for the PIT count should be sensitive to the reality that some people may not be willing to participate in PIT count events if they are going to be seen as homeless. Communities have addressed this challenge by minimizing or removing references to homelessness and focusing instead on housing status. For instance, when conducting surveys, rather than volunteers stating that they are conducting homeless surveys, volunteers can ask participants if they would be willing to answer a few questions about their current housing situation. Additionally, interviewers should be careful to maintain confidentiality and be sensitive to how the survey is administered. For instance, when interviews are conducted in a more open setting, interviewers should pay attention to their surroundings and whether others in the area are likely to overhear responses to the surveys. Being aware of and sensitive to these kinds of dynamics can help to make the count a success. Use social media to raise awareness and outreach: Data from studies indicates that youth living on the streets or other places not meant for human habitation use social media. Social media can be used to spread the word about the count, including information about location and incentives to participate in the count. Text messaging platforms can also be helpful in spreading the word to them.

Count in Locations Where Youth Experiencing Homelessness Gather: Because unaccompanied youth tend to gather in places different from adults who experience homelessness, a community should identify “hot spots” such as malls, fast food restaurants, or encampments inside and outside urban areas, where youth tend to congregate. To encourage as many unaccompanied youth to be included in the PIT count, communities should also consider planning magnet events, using social media to raise awareness and outreach, and providing services, food, and other incentives to youth being counted. Communities can provide incentives and food, coordinate transportation, meet youth in familiar and comfortable spaces, schedule meetings during youth-friendly hours, and leverage existing relationships youth have with trusted adults.

Be Flexible as to the Best Time of Day to Conduct the Count: Youth might not be visible on the street during school hours. Consider assessing count routes prior to the count to ensure that teams are in the right places at the right times. A location that is crowded in the morning might be empty only a few hours later. A CoC may choose to extend the hours of the count into the evening hours to reach youth



during the time between when drop-in programs close for the day and when youth retire for the night. CoCs choosing to do this must take the steps necessary to ensure people are not double counted. CoCs surveying an area multiple times throughout the day must include interview questions that help to determine a youth is not counted twice. For example, interviewers can ask if the person they are surveying previously answered the survey. Many communities create unique identifiers from the data they collect (e.g., combine first name initials, last name initials, age, and gender) and look for duplicates based on the unique identifiers they create.

Consider Conducting a Count Over Multiple Days: A community may choose to conduct a count for up to seven days. Communities conducting multi-day counts must also use a survey to ensure they do not double count any youth experiencing homelessness. They must also designate a single night as their PIT count date and ask youth where they were sleeping relative to that night. This should be the first night of a multi-night count. For example, if a CoC's count night is January 24 and its volunteers conduct surveys for an additional five days, they should continue to ask persons they administer the survey to where they slept on January 24.

Adopt a Survey that is Youth-Specific: This PIT count is a unique opportunity to engage youth experiencing homelessness. While CoCs must ensure they collect HUD's required data elements, CoCs can decide to ask additional questions. For instance, many communities have expanded the list of locations where people slept to encompass the homeless definitions used by various federal, state, and local programs. Thus, a survey tailored for youth can provide invaluable information about where youth are sleeping. HUD and its federal partners encourage communities to record the number and information about youth in this broader definition, including doubled-up/couch-surfing youth that may not be eligible for HUD homeless assistance, for local planning purposes. While CoCs need to be able to parse out the data to report to HUD on who meets the HUD homeless definition, they should use all of the data they collect to form a more complete picture of homelessness among youth in their communities.

Communicate the Data: The PIT count data create a wealth of knowledge that should be shared. Finding ways to include this information, in reports to the community, elected officials, funders, and other interested stakeholders is extremely valuable. As stated above, share all of the information that you can and be honest about the data you receive. For instance, if you collect data on a broader set of homeless and housing instability situations, let audiences know that the data represent just the youth that were identified during the count and that there are many others not identified during the count. This highlights that it is a large problem and coordination and resources are needed to solve it. This message is even more powerful when combined with homeless enrollment data from the schools. Many communities have included information on homeless enrollment data in their local reports to emphasize that homelessness among children and youth is a serious concern.



Additional Youth PIT Count Resources

This document compiles feedback from several communities as well as larger efforts. Listed below are just a few resources that communities can use to analyze and improve their existing process. CoCs should continue to ensure they meet HUD's reporting requirements as outlined in HUD's

<https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Notice-CPD-16-060-2017-HIC-PIT-Data-Collection-Notice.pdf>

[Youth Count! Process Study](#) by the Urban Institute

[We Count, California!: Lessons Learned from Efforts to Improve Youth Inclusion in California's 2015 Point-in-Time Counts](#) by the California Homeless Youth Project

[Voices of Youth Count Toolkit](#) by Chapin Hall

[Stand Up and Be Counted: Better Data Collection on Youth Experiencing Homelessness](#) by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

[Youth Count Toolkit](#) by the True Colors Fund

[HUD Point-in-Time Count Collaboration in North Carolina](#) by National Center for Homeless Education