Vermont Youth Count 2014

Youth Count Overview and Strategies that Work

The youth counts implemented by the pilot sites were not uniform in their design, which gives Vermont the opportunity to look at strategies that worked and failed. Likewise, not all sites were identical (rural vs. suburban vs. urban), so what worked in New York City might not be applicable to Vermont. Regardless, the report issued by The Urban Institute defines the following guidelines for all future counts:

- The survey design must be pretested to identify best wording, ideal survey length, and determine the type/extent of training for counters. Training sessions should include practice interviews, and counters should be monitored during actual interviews to ensure proper wording/presentation of the survey.
- Define the population clearly (age, homelessness, unaccompanied)
- Only one site, Cleveland, OH, chose to conduct their surveys online rather than in person, and many Cleveland youth had concerns over the privacy of information they sent through the Internet. With this and the added concerns about the NSA, conducting the survey in person would likely secure more participants.
- Schools should be engaged in conducting outreach and raising awareness about the count. If possible, they should also conduct a school-wide survey of students' housing status.
- CoCs should create a planning subcommittee, with the main task of identifying ways to expand coverage and include unaccompanied youth.
- Engage youth service providers.
- Engage LGBTQ partners.
- Involve youth in the counts (outreach and design, not administration).
- Use social media as a tool for outreach and raising awareness about the count.
- Develop ways to improve youth count coverage from pilot sites.
  - While shelter counts are straightforward and should not pose future issues, the Urban Institute recommends improving the design of street counts and magnet events.
    - In street counts, focus on more locations than "hot spots," as this leaves out youth elsewhere. Randomly selecting blocks or block groups would improve the reliability of the street counts.
    - Magnet events (e.g. dinner/movie night at a youth shelter) were problematic in that they mostly attracted service-involved youth, while their main goal was to attract those not found in the street count (i.e. those doubled up or couch surfing). Future planning should focus on how to attract hidden populations to magnet events and/or determine if other strategies, locations, or service types are needed to reach this group
- Fully integrate the youth count with the PIT count.
  - Ways to expand PIT count coverage so that it better counts youth
    - Expand to include day coverage for youth.

- - Go beyond youth hot spots and develop a comprehensive sampling plan.
    - Hold youth magnet events and explore ways to enhance the attraction of non-service-involved youth to these events.
- Utilize core data elements (CDEs).
- Devise means of deduplicating surveys.
- Sites should conduct a "post-count debrief," where they gather feedback from counters, service providers, and other participants to improve future counts.

Designing the Survey

The Youth Count report issued by The Urban Institute recommends that the survey be framed as a "housing status" questionnaire, to avoid the stigma surrounding "homelessness." As mentioned, evidence suggests it should also be conducted in person, rather than online, to avoid privacy concerns. These strategies are designed to capture as large a sample of homeless or unstably housed youth as possible.

For the nonshetler "street" counts, pilot sites tended to downplay geographic-based strategies, instead opting for variations on service-based enumeration (SBE) focusing on youth-service agencies or activities. The SBE model involves going to programs, agencies, and even businesses known to serve or accommodate homeless people in general and homeless youth in particular. The Urban Institute recommends that all but the most urbanized sites use SBEs over geographic-based sampling efforts (i.e. the systematic sampling strategies used by New York and Los Angeles).

Barring legal restrictions, schools are one of the most valuable resources for youth counts. Surveys have the potential to be conducted during school. It's important to note, however, that the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) restricts the ability of schools to share information about their students without parental consent. This has been interpreted more than one way, depending on the district. Some will not share any disaggregated data, while others will provide de-identified individual-level data. Additionally, the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment to the General Education Provisions Act dictates that school districts must gain parental consent for youth to participate in a survey, which becomes an issue for unaccompanied youth without parents.

Some aspects of the survey and youth count design have more flexibility and are more dependent on the preferences of the local CoCs. The following parameters must be decided:

- Should youth volunteers conduct the survey? Among sites that did not allow youth administration of the survey, their decision stemmed from concerns about youth asking their peers sensitive questions and whether youth were well-equipped to answer questions or handle situations professionally.
- How to survey? - Survey all people encountered or use a sample (e.g. using a random start and taking every nth person)
- Whether to conduct survey at the same time as the unsheltered count or later; if later, how, where, and with whom?

- Whether to wake people up if doing a survey in conjunction with a nighttime count
- For non-shelter (street) counts:
    -Method of covering territory: cover entire territory or use a sample
        -If using a sample: simple-random sample or stratify and include certainty blocks
    - Decide which types of places to search and leave alone
    - Decide whether to use service-based enumeration (SBE), where one would go to programs, agencies, and/or businesses known to serve or accommodate homeless people in general and homeless youth in particular, and if yes, whether to do it by itself or in conjunction with a geographic strategy.

Assembling Data and Dissemination of Results

- Methods of De-duplication: Strategies focus on preventing double counting, while other sites focused on eliminating duplicate surveys after the fact
    - At nearly all sites, volunteers were instructed to preface the surveys by asking youth if they had already completed the survey. This strategy is less useful in cases where sites use incentives for youth completing the survey
    - Sites using the prevention strategy worked to create unique identifiers for youth participating in the survey
    - Sites opting for the elimination of surveys after the fact reviewed responses to the surveys conducted during the day to see if a youth reported staying in a shelter the night before.
    - Use location information: For unsheltered count, Hennepin County and NYC recorded cross streets or other indicators of the location where a youth was counted or surveyed. This location information was cross-checked and any surveys that seemed to be from the same location were further checked for demographic and other responses that might indicate they were for the same person.
    - De-duplication involving data from schools
- In most sites, the lead Youth Count! agency (also the lead agency for the CoC) received the youth count and survey data and was responsible for sharing it with the larger community.