

APPENDIX C

YCT! Lessons Learned – Report prepared by TNOYS

THE *YOUTH COUNT TEXAS!*

PROJECT: PROCESS EVALUATION REPORT

*Reflections from Texas' First Statewide Count
of Youth Experiencing Homelessness*

SEPTEMBER 2016



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Texas Network of Youth Services is a state network of youth service agencies, with a mission to strengthen, support, and protect critical services for Texas youth and their families. TNOYS members include emergency shelters, transitional living programs, family counseling providers, crisis intervention programs, residential treatment centers, and other community-based programs. TNOYS advocates for funding, policies, and programs that benefit youth; provides training and consultation services to youth programs; and works in partnership with youth to demonstrate their capabilities when adults invest in them. TNOYS was founded in 1980.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	3
YOUTH COUNT TEXAS! PROJECT DEVELOPMENT & IMPLEMENTATION	5
<i>Phase I: Development of the Homeless Youth Survey Tool</i>	5
<i>Phase II: Planning and Implementation</i>	7
FINDINGS & DISCUSSION.....	14
RECOMMENDATIONS	24
CONCLUSION.....	27
ENDNOTES.....	28

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to the following organizations for their participation in activities to support this project and evaluation:

ACH Child and Family Services
Bryan Independent School District
City of Waco, Housing and Economic Development Services
Coalition for the Homeless Houston/Harris County
Connections Individual and Family Services
Covenant House Texas
East Texas Human Needs Network
El Paso Center for Children
El Paso Coalition for the Homeless
Ending Community Homelessness Coalition
Journey to Dream
Kitchen Table
LifeWorks
Metro Dallas Homeless Alliance
OutYouth
Salvation Army Southern Territory
South Alamo Regional Alliance for the Homeless
Tarrant County Homeless Coalition
Texas Homeless Education Office
Texas Homeless Network
Transition Resource Action Center (TRAC)
Victoria Homeless Coalition

This project was completed for:



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, local, state and federal policymakers across the country have become increasingly concerned about the needs of youth experiencing homelessness or unstable housing. In response, organizations are conducting youth counts in cities and some states across the country to better measure and understand youth homelessness, in order to inform planning for services and assess change. These efforts can best be described as “works in progress,” and many of those implementing youth counts find that the associated logistical and other challenges can be daunting.

Against this backdrop of interest and concern about the needs of youth experiencing homelessness nationally, Texas state legislators passed House Bill 679 in 2015 to call for research into the number of youth experiencing homelessness in Texas and their needs. In response to this mandate, the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA) launched *Youth Count Texas!*, the first-ever effort to conduct a statewide count of youth experiencing homelessness in Texas. TDHCA contracted with Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) and from summer 2015 to spring 2016, TNOYS coordinated the development and implementation of a survey tool, data collection, and related count activities across Texas.

This report describes and evaluates the processes that were used to plan and implement this statewide initiative, documenting successes, challenges, and lessons learned. Data and findings from the 1,007 surveys collected will be analyzed and reported on separately as part of the final strategic planning phase of the initiative. The findings and recommendations in this report complement and help to explain the youth survey data itself. Additionally, findings from this process evaluation will allow public officials, advocates, service providers, and other stakeholders the opportunity to refine future state and local efforts to count youth experiencing homelessness and assess their needs.

The *Youth Count Texas!* project mobilized service providers, community volunteers, advocates, and other stakeholders across Texas, with 13 communities (seven of which represent major metropolitan areas) hosting youth count events or activities and submitting survey data. To plan and implement *Youth Count Texas!*, TNOYS worked in collaboration with state and local organizations, including Continuum of Care (CoC) organizations, homeless coalitions, and partners at Texas Homeless Network, Texas Homeless Education Office, and university faculty/researchers at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Houston.

The evaluation report on *Youth Count Texas!* includes a number of insights and lessons learned:

- A flexible process that allowed for local autonomy and included incentives seemed to encourage community participation and facilitate data collection. Youth services organizations, CoC organizations, and homeless coalitions were

able to successfully collaborate in many communities in order to plan and complete *Youth Count Texas!* activities.

- Many count organizers were able to incorporate youth count best practices into their events and activities, though the project's short time frame placed limits on the extent to which they could do so.
- There were both advantages and disadvantages associated with combining a youth count with the annual HUD PIT count.
- Count organizers, team members, and volunteers overwhelmingly reported that they would participate in a future youth count.
- Planning time was severely limited, and a longer timeline would have enhanced the process and the experience for count organizers and partners.
- Competing priorities for survey content and length may have affected participation and underscore potential conflict between the goals of a needs assessment versus a homeless count.
- Although some schools participated in *Youth Count Texas!*, and one school district led the initiative in a community, many schools were hesitant to participate. School engagement was largely missing in the count overall and may have led to undercounting of school-age youth.

Based on these learnings, we offer the following recommendations for future youth counts:

- Clarify the purpose and goal(s) of a future youth count up front.
- Determine whether the PIT count will be the methodology used in future youth counts.
- Clarify the definition to be used for "homeless youth" in future counts and ensure that all organizers and stakeholders use the agreed-upon definition.
- Identify strategies to increase participation from schools in youth counts and to obtain data related to youth experiencing homelessness through school programs that already exist.
- Once procedural decisions are made, allow adequate planning time for organizations to prepare for future counts.

These findings and recommendations, detailed further in the full report, can support future state and local efforts to assess the needs of youth experiencing homelessness and make important contributions to the broader ongoing dialogue about youth counts that are increasingly happening across the country. The information gained from reflecting on the recent *Youth Count Texas!* process may also be especially valuable since few, if any, youth counts have been conducted on this large a scale in a state as large as Texas.

YOUTH COUNT TEXAS!

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT & IMPLEMENTATION

The Texas Legislature passed House Bill 679 in May 2015, during the 84th Texas Regular Legislative Session, and it became effective Sept. 1, 2015. The bill tasked TDHCA with collecting data on the number of youth experiencing homelessness in the state, examining their needs, and determining the degree to which those needs are being met by current programs, as well as developing a strategic plan for reducing youth homelessness.

TDHCA determined that the statewide administration of a Homeless Youth Survey Tool would be the best method for implementing House Bill 679, and created the three-phase *Youth Count Texas!* initiative. Phase I focused on developing a Homeless Youth Survey Tool to be administered to youth experiencing homelessness in order to count them, collect demographic information, and collect data on their needs. Phase II focused on collecting the data by administering the Homeless Youth Survey Tool. TDHCA contracted with TNOYS to conduct the first two phases, engaging stakeholders and the Texas Interagency Council for the Homeless workgroup in the survey development process.

Phase III of the initiative is currently in progress and entails analyzing data that were collected, as well as data from other sources, including the Texas Education Agency and the Department of Family and Protective Services. Phase III will also include using the data to inform strategic planning to better serve youth who are experiencing homelessness and to reduce the overall number of youth experiencing homelessness in Texas.

PHASE I: DEVELOPMENT OF THE HOMELESS YOUTH SURVEY

Under a contract that commenced in July 2015, TNOYS began work on Phase I of the initiative, consulting with experts, working with stakeholders, reviewing literature related to other youth counts, and conducting forums that allowed interested parties to provide input about the survey design and content. Experts included faculty from the University of Texas at Austin, LBJ School of Public Affairs (UTLBJ) and the University of Houston, School of Social Work (UofH).

TNOYS also worked in partnership with the Texas Interagency Council for the Homeless (TICH) to plan and implement *Youth Count Texas!*. The TICH was established by the 74th Texas Legislature in 1995 to coordinate the state's resources and services to address homelessness. The TICH serves as an advisory committee to TDHCA and includes representatives from 11 state agencies, as well as members appointed by the governor, lieutenant governor, and speaker of the House of Representatives as well as several nonprofit advisory members, including TNOYS.

TNOYS and TDHCA worked with the TICH to create a workgroup for TICH members interested in being part of *Youth Count Texas!*. TNOYS facilitated conference calls with the TICH workgroup throughout the course of the planning and implementation phases of *Youth Count Texas!*.

Once an initial draft of the survey was developed, TNOYS interviewed and convened meetings with nearly 100 stakeholders over the summer of 2015 to review and provide input on it. Stakeholders included the Texas Homeless Education Office (THEO), the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), youth service organizations, Continuum of Care (CoC) umbrella organizations, and TNOYS members throughout Texas. TNOYS facilitated in-person and virtual roundtable discussions to allow stakeholders multiple opportunities to understand and comment on the survey.

FINAL VERSIONS OF SURVEYS

TNOYS also reviewed all of the Point-In-Time (PIT)¹ count surveys currently being used by CoCs in Texas to annually count and survey homeless individuals, and the HUD guidelines for the PIT to create a Homeless Youth Survey Tool that could be used in conjunction with the annual PIT count of homeless individuals if needed.

TNOYS completed the survey in August 2015 and delivered two final versions to TDHCA (see Appendix). Each version was provided in English and Spanish.² The first version was designed to be used in conjunction with the HUD's PIT Count in January and included all data elements required by HUD to be collected during that process. The second version of the survey included the same questions as well as additional qualitative questions to gather more information regarding the needs of youth experiencing homelessness. The surveys included many questions already included on CoC surveys for the PIT count to balance the convenience of implementing the survey for CoCs with the importance of collecting consistent data from communities across Texas.



Brianna, Houston

DEFINING THE YOUTH TO BE SURVEYED

For the purposes of the count, House Bill 679 defined the criteria of a “homeless youth.” One of those criteria is a youth under the age of 19 who “lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence” or one who “has a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for humans” or “is living in a car, park, other public space, abandoned building, substandard housing, bus or train station, or similar setting.”

TNOYS and others involved in youth services recommended collecting data for youth experiencing homelessness up through age 24 to reflect youth who have aged out of foster care without stable housing. TDHCA determined that counting and surveying youth

up through age 24 would be acceptable provided that the data could be disaggregated by age and reported by categories as needed to satisfy the legislative mandate.

It was also determined that the definition of youth homelessness provided by House Bill 679 was inclusive of youth who are couch surfing or staying in hotels or motels, since these arrangements most often constitute “lacking a fixed or regular night time residence.” Additionally, it was determined that youth who are “doubled up” may qualify as either lacking a fixed or regular night time residence or as living in substandard housing. The United States Census Bureau³ defines “doubled up” as “households that include at least one ‘additional’ adult – in other words, a person 18 years or older who is not enrolled in school and is not the householder, spouse, or cohabiting partner of the householder.” These decisions are important because they demonstrate support for the definition of homelessness established through the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which establishes certain services for homeless children and youth attending elementary and secondary schools.

The definition of homelessness that is used for HUD’s PIT counts is narrower than the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness. For this reason, the *Youth Count Texas!* Homeless Youth Survey Tool was designed to include both HUD and House Bill 679’s definitions with the ability to distinguish between them. For example, “staying in a hotel or motel” was included as its own answer choice so that those youth could be included in reports to the Texas Legislature but not in HUD PIT counts.

Beyond designing the surveys, TNOYS worked to obtain commitment from a majority of the CoCs to ask their governing boards for approval to use the survey instruments. In 2015 there were 11 CoCs in Texas. Commitment was received from CoCs or their members in Austin (LifeWorks), the Balance of State (BoS) CoC (Texas Homeless Network), Dallas (Metro Dallas Homeless Alliance), El Paso (El Paso Coalition for the Homeless), San Antonio (Homeless Youth Task Force), and Waco (Waco Independent School District).

PHASE II: PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Under a second contract with TDHCA, TNOYS was charged with coordinating the implementation of the *Youth Count Texas!* initiative, including overseeing the collection of data and providing resources and assistance to support community count organizers and partners in administering the Homeless Youth Survey Tool to youth. TNOYS developed training materials; a public service announcement video; and an online toolkit for youth counts. The toolkit provided guidance on volunteer recruitment and training, community partnership development, and count event communications/social media. TNOYS also provided training to count volunteers, and offered one-on-one technical assistance to count organizers, including CoCs.

SUBCONTRACTOR SUPPORT

TNOYS subcontracted with researchers at the University of Texas, LBJ School of Public Affairs (UTLBJ) to provide coordination, technical assistance, and support for data collection and preparation.

TNOYS subcontracted with Texas Homeless Network (THN) to provide training and technical assistance through a webinar series for all the interested and participating

communities. THN also facilitated *Youth Count Texas!* participation from cities located in the BoS CoC for which it is the lead. The BoS CoC includes 215 mostly rural Texas counties.



Damon, San Antonio

THN has more than 15 years of experience supporting the PIT counts in these communities and has a long history of providing training and support to homeless coalitions regarding PIT counts.

THN staff also supported and coordinated the efforts of four individual communities from within the BoS CoC that elected to conduct youth counts for *Youth Count Texas!*. Together, these four communities represented approximately 23 percent of the 26 local BoS coalitions' population.

INCORPORATING PROCESS EVALUATION

This process evaluation was also part of the implementation of *Youth Count Texas!*. TNOYS gathered information about how the project was conducted and the organizers' experiences, including what they found difficult or believed supported their success. Specifically, TNOYS identified:

- Activities that occurred as part of the *Youth Count Texas!* initiative;
- Strategies that facilitated successful youth counts; and,
- Challenges that CoCs and other count organizers faced when planning and implementing their youth counts.

To answer these questions, TNOYS staff conducted interviews with count organizers in 10 communities after their counts had occurred. The interviews generally included CoC staff and, in some cases, individuals from partnering organizations as well. TNOYS also gathered information about the process and participant experiences from stakeholders with a statewide perspective such as THN, THEO, and the researchers at UTLBJ. Finally, TNOYS reviewed surveys completed by volunteers about their youth count experiences, count tracking documents, and contract documents as information sources.

TIMELINE FOR THE PROJECT

The implementation phase for the *Youth Count Texas!* contract, which began in October 2015, called for a *Youth Count Texas!* toolkit and webinar series to be launched in late

November, and for other training to be available as of early December.

Most surveys were administered to youth during PIT counts and magnet events that occurred in January or February 2016. The exceptions were Austin's count, which occurred in October 2015 and served as a pilot for the project, and Bryan/College Station's count, which occurred in March 2016. Austin's count occurred before other *Youth Count Texas!* counts because Austin was already planning its own youth count before the *Youth Count Texas!* initiative launched. The count organizers in Austin agreed to partner with TNOYS to conduct their count as a pilot for *Youth Count Texas!*.

TNOYS conducted its debriefing interviews with count organizers and stakeholders in February and March 2016, as local organizers wrapped up their counts and related activities.

PARTICIPATING COMMUNITIES AND LEADERSHIP

The localities for administering *Youth Count Texas!* surveys were determined by TDHCA staff, who designated Austin, Dallas, Arlington, Fort Worth, Corpus Christi, Houston, El Paso, and San Antonio as the highest priority cities to participate in the initiative. These areas are the largest population centers in Texas and, as a result of their size, receive Homeless Housing and Services Program funds per Texas Government Code 2306.2585.

Six of the eight cities voluntarily donated a portion of their funds to support *Youth Count Texas!*. (Since Fort Worth/Arlington are coordinated under one CoC, those two cities were counted as one community. Instead of eight priority cities, this report will refer to seven priority communities.) In addition to the seven priority communities, six additional communities chose to participate: Denton, New Braunfels/Comal County, Victoria, Bryan/College Station, Waco, and Tyler.

One or more counts of youth experiencing homelessness were conducted in each of the areas listed above. Eight sites reported they conducted their youth count as part of their required PIT count. The others conducted counts independently. Some communities did both a street outreach count during the PIT count and additional surveying, such as at a magnet event targeting youth.

The table on the next page offers a snapshot by community of the organizations that led local *Youth Count Texas!* efforts and their youth count activities.

YOUTH COUNT TEXAS! EFFORTS ACROSS THE STATE

CIT(IES)	COUNT ORGANIZER	DATE OF COUNT ACTIVITIES	IN CONJUNCTION WITH PIT
Arlington/Fort Worth	Tarrant County Homeless Coalition	February 20, 2016 magnet event + February 22 and 25, 2016 counts - shelter surveying	No
Austin	Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO) in partnership with LifeWorks and OutYouth	October 22, 2015 count + magnet event	No
Bryan/ College Station/ Brazos Valley	Bryan Independent School District	Week of March 7, 2016 - surveying in schools + shelter all week	No
Corpus Christi	Salvation Army Southern Territory	January 21, 2016 count + school-based count same week	Yes
Dallas	Metro Area Homeless Alliance	January 21, 2016 count + February 24th magnet event	Yes
Denton	Journey to Dream (with Texas Homeless Network support)	January 21, 2016 count + January 28, 2016 magnet event	Yes
El Paso	El Paso Coalition for the Homeless	January 21, 2016	Yes
Houston	Coalition for the Homeless Houston/Harris County	Jan 25, 26, and 27, 2016 count	Yes
New Braunfels/ Comal County	Connections Individual and Family Services in partnership Kitchen Table (with Texas Homeless Network support)	January 25-30, 2016 count	Yes
San Antonio	South Alamo Regional Alliance for the Homeless	January 23, 2016 count	No
Tyler	East Texas Human Needs Network (Did not officially participate in Youth Count Texas!, but did submit core data on youth through Texas Homeless Network.)	January 21, 2016 - As part of regular PIT efforts, some youth were surveyed on core data elements only.	Yes
Victoria	Victoria Homeless Coalition (with Texas Homeless Network Support)	January 21, 2016 count + February 15 2016 magnet event	Yes
Waco/Temple/ McClennan County	City of Waco, Housing and Economic Development Services	January 27-28, 2016 count	Yes

In many cases, the counts and related events were led by the CoCs because these organizations already work with and pass on funding to homeless service providers in their communities, and they already perform annual PIT counts of homeless individuals as required by HUD. Considering the compressed timeline of *Youth Count Texas!*, TNOYS gave CoCs and other count organizers the option of doing their youth counts in conjunction with their annual PIT effort, or as stand-alone efforts.

As mentioned above, CoCs often have team members who are knowledgeable and experienced in doing the types of counts HUD requires. However, HUD's PIT counts have historically been thought to undercount homeless youth, since the location of youth experiencing homelessness is different than that of adults. Homeless adults can often be found in camps or other outdoor locations, living in shelters, and actively seeking help or resources. In contrast, researchers report that youth experiencing homelessness often fly "under the radar" by staying with friends or relatives, moving often from place to place (known as couch surfing), and working to avoid being identified as "homeless."⁴



Stephanie, Austin

To improve the likelihood that more youth would be counted, most CoCs partnered with the local youth service organizations in conducting their counts because youth-workers are more familiar with the behavior of this age group. In general, youth service organizations reported playing a stronger role in *Youth Count Texas!* than they have in past PIT counts.

Inherent in its design, the *Youth Count Texas!* project could not reach 100 percent of the state. However, counts were conducted in the state's largest urban areas where the majority of the state's population lives. Counts were conducted in smaller cities and more rural areas as well. As mentioned previously, BoS coalitions that participated represented about 23 percent of the population of the BoS counties with coalitions that currently conduct HUD PITs.

Many localities held events in addition to their street counts, referred to in this report and in other youth counts as "magnet events." These typically happened on a separate day or days. Magnet events were typically a community fair-type event where youth might participate in sponsored activities, obtain food and information, and sometimes receive services or referrals, as well as complete a *Youth Count Texas!* survey, if appropriate.

Magnet events offered an important alternate means through which youth experiencing homelessness could be reached, identified, and surveyed, especially if they were not as likely to be found “on the street.”

No two communities had *Youth Count Texas!* plans and events that looked exactly the same. In one locality, organizers led a PIT-style count that included three different events on a single day. First, an early morning street count was conducted at previously identified “hotspots” such as camps known to be popular with individuals experiencing homelessness. Second, an afternoon carnival with food and activities was held in a drop-in center for homeless youth. Third, a partner organization serving lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQQ) youth held an evening open house event. At all three events, youth were offered incentives for their survey participation (bus passes, toiletries, raffle tickets for larger prizes such as a bicycle or backpack or haircut gift card).

In addition to the events described above, the count organizers used other strategies to reach youth experiencing homelessness and obtain survey responses during the same day. Project volunteers were stationed outside the central public library downtown and at a transitional apartment-based living program for youth previously in foster care. In addition, staff at a local adult shelter received training materials and incentives, so they could survey youth they saw on that day. Youth experiencing homelessness were involved in planning and marketing both the street counts and the carnival using social media, word of mouth and flyers. Young adult college students also administered surveys as volunteers.

SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

As stated above, two versions of the survey emerged from TNOYS’s design process and were made available in the *Youth Count Texas!* toolkit on the TNOYS website. Surveys and survey keys were made available in English and Spanish. The longer survey is six pages and the shortened survey two pages. Both versions contain basic questions about where the person is sleeping and the conditions that contributed to their homeless status as well as questions about their education, work history, status as a parent, health, and needs for assistance.

There are core questions that were a subset of the questions in both surveys. TDHCA, THN, and TNOYS agreed upon the most important core data elements in collaboration with the CoCs; communities were given the option to collect only these core elements at a minimum instead of all survey questions. Certain communities had their own survey questions they planned to ask in addition to the core data elements, and one community designed its own survey completely. As a result, there was significant variation among the surveys that were implemented across the state for *Youth Count Texas!* but there were also common core data elements included on most surveys.

Volunteers administering surveys were encouraged to get as much information as possible from youth surveyed, while skipping questions youth did not wish to answer. Volunteers were trained to protect youths’ confidentiality and obtain their informed (verbal) consent. TNOYS and TDHCA determined that neither written consent nor parental consent was needed in order for youth to participate in the survey as designed. The decision was based on legal precedent and model state statutes⁵ suggesting that unaccompanied minors are

able to consent verbally to participate in voluntary research and that the importance of understanding their needs overrides issues of parental consent. No problems or conflicts were reported during the data collection phase of the project.

Some communities had volunteers complete hard copy surveys while others entered information on tablets or other electronic devices through applications developed specifically for the survey. Some communities submitted their raw data directly to TNOYS while others compiled the data into a spreadsheet and submitted it. Still others used Qualtrics, a web-based survey service, to compile their data.

It was important to build in methods for preventing participant duplication (i.e., surveying the same person more than once) especially since some communities performed counts over a period of days, in different settings, and sometimes with different volunteers. *Youth Count Texas!* organizers prevented duplication by training volunteers to ensure they did not canvass the same area more than once and to ask respondents if they had already completed the survey. If the respondents indicated that they had taken the survey already, the volunteer would halt the survey process.

Count volunteers also collected the youth's date of birth. By itself, a birth date is not considered enough information to identify a specific individual (and therefore compromise confidentiality) but the collection of a birth date does support data analysis teams with the identification and removal of duplicate surveys. It is important to note that most existing research suggests youth counts tend to undercount youth experiencing homelessness and that stakeholders should be more concerned about under-counting than duplication.⁶

In all, the 13 communities across Texas that participated in the *Youth Count Texas!* project submitted 1,007 surveys. The number of viable surveys will be lower after additional measures to prevent duplication and protect data validity are complete. Additionally, the data analysis may suggest linkages between the quality and quantity of data collected by site, method, and strategy that will add additional information not presently known.

However, the number of surveys appears impressive given that this project is the first of its kind in Texas. The high number of surveys collected suggests that *Youth Count Texas!* has the potential to provide powerful insights into the needs of youth experiencing homelessness in Texas. Additionally, the high degree of both community



FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

A FLEXIBLE PROCESS THAT ALLOWED FOR LOCAL AUTONOMY AND INCLUDED INCENTIVES SEEMED TO ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND FACILITATE DATA COLLECTION.

While project planners originally envisioned a uniform process for the implementation of *Youth Count Texas!* across the state, communities were given flexibility in how they conducted their counts to encourage as much participation as possible. As mentioned previously, some communities implemented traditional PIT counts, which meant counting sheltered youth as well as going to other locations where youth experiencing homelessness might be sleeping or spending time on a certain day and time, such as libraries, parks, highway underpasses, and more. Other communities organized or attended magnet events designed to draw youth experiencing homelessness to a location so that they could be surveyed. Some localities utilized both count methodologies. Many localities conducted serial counts (over a period of days) or held multiple events.

Localities also had flexibility about whether to use the survey designed by TNOYS or adapt the survey to serve other local community needs. For communities already experienced in doing annual PIT counts, there was some resistance to altering or adding to their practiced processes. To encourage more uniform participation in the process, TNOYS, in partnership with TDHCA, offered \$2,000 to the seven communities TDHCA had designated as high priority. In order to receive the funds, each community entered into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with TNOYS. TNOYS later offered the same resources and agreement to other communities interested in participation in the initiative.

The MOU required the communities to use the survey designed by TNOYS or include at least the core *Youth Count Texas!* data elements in their own surveys. Six of the seven priority communities entered into such an agreement. Additionally, through another grant not associated with the funding TNOYS received from TDHCA to plan and implement *Youth Count Texas!*, TNOYS was able to offer all participating communities up to \$200 each for youth leader/youth engagement stipends to encourage communities to partner with youth who formerly experienced homelessness to plan count activities.

This flexibility was crucial in order to secure community participation in *Youth Count Texas!*, given the short planning timeline and the fact that many communities were already invested in doing counts of homeless persons, including youth, using their own surveys and methodologies. The \$2,000 incentives and agreements that were required in order to obtain them may have also been instrumental in securing community participation and ensuring that data were collected and shared with TNOYS for the purpose of *Youth Count Texas!*

LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS LEARNED ABOUT AND APPLIED BEST PRACTICES DURING THEIR YOUTH COUNT TEXAS! ACTIVITIES.

For the localities that sent interviewers out into the street, many sent them to “hotspots” or locations known or believed to be popular with people experiencing homelessness, including youth. This method is acknowledged as “preferred” according to past research,⁷ although its success depends on several factors. These factors include having accurate knowledge as to where hotspots are located and having the skill and experience to recognize how youth experiencing homelessness may differ from adults experiencing homelessness. Communities used individualized strategies to identify hotspots. One youth services group created an interactive Google map on which staff and volunteers collected information about where youth experiencing homelessness were staying over a period of months. They were able to use this map to guide their youth count. Some youth service agencies engaged their clients as partners in the initiative and asked them to help identify hotspots for the count.

Magnet events, or events intended to draw in youth experiencing homelessness, were another best practice strategy applied as part of *Youth Count Texas!*. Based on experience from *Youth Count Texas!*, magnet events were effective if organizers got the word out to the right people and appealed to the target audience through their activities, incentives, time and location. Count organizers indicated that it was sometimes hard to predict the success of such events, especially if they were first-time efforts, and that weather and other variables could affect event attendance. Anecdotally, many organizers were satisfied with the turnout of their magnet events, which often doubled as opportunities to offer support, service referrals and other information/benefits to attendees. Magnet events included a carnival at a street outreach program, a resource fair, and a high school basketball tournament.

Involvement of youth, especially youth currently or formerly experiencing homelessness, is perhaps one of the key best practices for conducting an effective youth count. Involving youth improved several aspects of planning and implementation and was helpful with survey development, survey administration, and identifying hotspots. Also, experience from the youth counts showed that youth can help with communicating about the counts, selecting appealing activities, and giving advice on which communication strategies work best in reaching other youth. Several communities reported being able to recruit youth to help them identify hotspots and give feedback on other aspects of the process. Some youth experiencing homelessness were also engaged to communicate about or market events. Several organizers indicated they would place more emphasis on this aspect in the future, especially if they can have adequate time to engage these young people.

THERE ARE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES ASSOCIATED WITH COMBINING A YOUTH COUNT WITH THE ANNUAL HUD PIT COUNT.

The *Youth Count Texas!* initiative was an opportunity to see the benefits and challenges of combining a count that specifically targeted youth experiencing homelessness with PIT counts, which are already organized and implemented by CoCs each year and target homeless individuals of all ages. The bulleted lists on the next page detail advantages and disadvantages of combining these methods, which were collected from process evaluation interviews, observations, and analysis.

COMBINING YOUTH COUNTS WITH POINT IN TIME COUNTS

ADVANTAGES

- There is an existing infrastructure in place. This means youth counts can be organized more quickly in conjunction with the PIT than as a separate process.
- The CoCs already engage and train hundreds of volunteers to count people who are experiencing homelessness. These volunteers may be equipped to identify youth as well as adults.
- CoCs have experience with surveying people experiencing homelessness and managing the count data.
- The PIT is a major federal initiative and has the support of HUD. It is more likely to be sustainable than a stand-alone youth count.
- Combining youth counts with the PIT facilitates a good opportunity for youth service agencies to strengthen their partnerships with CoC organizations and this coordination between youth service agencies and CoCs is very beneficial.

DISADVANTAGES

- Historically, the accuracy of PIT counts has been questioned, since there are intervening factors that impact the number of people counted.⁸ In other words, there are concerns that they may undercount.
- CoCs do not necessarily engage the professionals who work with homeless youth; youth service professionals may be key to a successful count and serve in roles that volunteers cannot.
- The process for administering the PIT, and the PIT surveys may not be appropriate for youth. For example, the PIT asks questions about health problems and other challenges but does not ask about the youths' strengths or resiliency. Youth development literature suggests that a strengths-based approach when working with youth is important.
- HUD's definition of homelessness, which is used for the PIT count, is more narrow than the McKinney Vento definition of homelessness, which was designed to recognize the unique characteristics and situations pertaining to children and youth who are homeless (verses adults).
- It may be challenging to fully engage CoCs in a youth count because they are invested in their own PIT counts and may want to continue operating like they always have. For example, they may not be willing to administer a survey that is designed to be appropriate for youth.

COUNT ORGANIZERS, TEAM MEMBERS, AND VOLUNTEERS OVERWHELMINGLY REPORTED THAT THEY WOULD PARTICIPATE IN A FUTURE YOUTH COUNT.

Many stakeholders who were interviewed during TNOYS' process evaluation communicated a strong sense of mission to help youth who are experiencing homelessness, as well as a sense of optimism that future youth counts can be

"We know that these kids are out there. We just have to figure out how we can get this number and to what end and what needs to be done. And this is not something that can be figured out in four months. But bringing the right people to the table is important because youth service providers know that this is an issue and these are the challenges..."

improved. Most stakeholders expressed a desire that youth counts be continued in future years. Many interviewers found the *Youth Count Texas!* project to be exciting and impactful. Specifically, count organizers and other stakeholders associated with the project said they would like to participate in future youth counts and that they had learned valuable lessons they would apply going forward. Organizers see youth counts and studies as important not only to understand the populations they serve, but to forge new community and statewide relationships.

Although not many debriefing surveys were collected from the volunteers who administered surveys, most volunteers who did complete a survey indicated they would likely participate again; other volunteers shared reflections on the process via interviews and those reflections

were largely positive. For example, a number of volunteers expressed gratitude for the opportunity to meet and talk with youth experiencing homelessness in order to learn more about the challenges facing these individuals. Some of these volunteers reported during training workshops prior to the count that they knew very little about youth homelessness but were excited to learn more and help out. Members of a large, longstanding volunteer organization reported that their participation in *Youth Count Texas!* was one of the most meaningful volunteer experiences they ever had.

PLANNING TIME WAS SEVERELY LIMITED, AND A LONGER TIMELINE WOULD HAVE ENHANCED THE PROCESS AND THE EXPERIENCE FOR COUNT ORGANIZERS AND PARTNERS.

With House Bill 679 passing in May 2015, and then going into effect three months later in September, the planning and implementation time for *Youth Count Texas!* was very short. For all parties involved to organize, launch, and implement a statewide data collection effort was challenging, especially in a state as vast as Texas. Even though some organizations had experience doing PIT homeless counts for HUD, only a few had experience actively focusing on youth experiencing homelessness.

As discussed elsewhere, identifying youth experiencing homelessness requires different methods and techniques than counting homeless adults.⁹ Therefore, for many of the communities that participated, *Youth Count Texas!* involved a significant learning curve, new processes, and new ways of collaborating with youth service providers. These are all elements that require extra time for meetings to plan activities and coordinate schedules

"I am so, so grateful to have had this opportunity to connect with youth who are experiencing homelessness in my area on such a meaningful level."

while forging new relationships or strengthening existing ones.

While it is not clear whether more time would have increased overall survey participation in *Youth Count Texas!*, some organizers said more preparation time would have enhanced the experience for their teams (especially those who hadn't done counts before). For example, some organizers reported they needed more time to be fully prepared, or that they did not understand until late in the process exactly what they would need in terms of training. Communication between TNOYS and all of the different count organizers was challenging at times; as a result, at least one organizer didn't learn until after the

count was complete that financial assistance had been available.

"There were a lot of missed opportunities simply because but we did not have the infrastructure or the time to really be able to capture that information. This could have been so much bigger, but we just couldn't do it."

The timing of the project was also challenging because it conflicted with other priorities, including of groups that were applying for HUD funding in late 2015, and then the winter holidays. The CoC

application for funding was due to HUD on November 20, 2015, and many CoCs that were administering the PIT counts were also applying for the CoC funding. Given that training and materials became available in the fall of 2015 and that many stakeholders wanted to be able to do their youth counts in conjunction with their mid-January PIT count, the timetable was significantly compressed.

Some organizers reported they thought that a year-round effort would make sense, and that it would be easier to build and maintain momentum for the project if it was ongoing or stretched out over the whole year.

Some organizers cited manpower and training issues as among the challenges they faced in completing *Youth Count Texas!*. However, it seems likely that more time to plan and anticipate these needs would eliminate many of the concerns in future counts. TNOYS training materials, toolkit, marketing collateral, and other resources were developed for the count and could be enhanced in the future as needed. There was also wide variation in the number of volunteers who were recruited or assigned to the *Youth Count Texas!* effort, depending, in part, on how well equipped CoCs and others were to incorporate *Youth Count Texas!* into their ongoing PIT practices. Groups reported utilizing as many as 83 volunteers and as few as four volunteers for their counts.

Now that a number of CoCs and youth service organizations have participated in the *Youth Count Texas!* project, organizers are better able to anticipate what they will need to do within their own organizations and coalitions to be prepared to coordinate youth counts in the future. Project coordinators at the state level should place emphasis on clarifying whether, when, and how a future youth count will occur – including how it might differ from the 2015-2016 count – and on communicating the associated details to stakeholders. It will be very important to publicize resources such as training or grant opportunities that may be available to assist count organizers and their teams, as well as what recommended changes, if any, will be made to count methodology.

SCHOOL PARTICIPATION IN THE COUNT VARIED ACROSS COMMUNITIES BUT WAS SEVERELY LIMITED OVERALL AND MAY HAVE RESULTED IN UNDERCOUNTING.

Of great concern to many stakeholders involved in planning and implementing *Youth Count Texas!* is the likelihood that a significant number of homeless school-aged children and teens were not counted. Other state youth homeless count studies indicate,¹⁰ and Texas project stakeholders agree, that homeless minors are not easy to find because they often blend in with their peers who have stable housing. This is complicated by the portion of youth experiencing homelessness who sleep at a friend's or relative's home (i.e., "couch surfing") rather than sleeping on the street, in a homeless camp, or in a shelter. Since schools already identify and provide certain services to students experiencing homelessness under McKinney-Vento, school homeless liaisons are viewed as key players in making *Youth Count Texas!* a bigger success.

About three quarters of *Youth Count Texas!* organizers reported partnering with local schools or districts in some way, though involvement varied significantly. On one end of the spectrum, homeless liaisons in one school district took on the job of administering surveys and forwarding data directly to TNOYS. Another city reported support from its school district in holding a magnet event that included sending invitations to identified youth and providing food and staffing for the event.

However, the high level of support indicated above was not common. More typically, localities received some support in form of communications to some students about magnet events. For example, in one city, homeless liaisons for the charter schools emailed youth to publicize a magnet event, yet homeless liaisons in the public schools for that city were not able to get school approval to invite their students. Elsewhere, local organizations reported they worked with the school-based mental health and case management program Communities in Schools or with homeless liaisons in some capacity. Several localities reported that they had made efforts to work with local schools and school districts and those plans never came to fruition because there were too many "hoops" to jump through, or because the school or district ultimately decided it could not officially participate.

School participation was especially complicated in larger metropolitan areas where there are several or even dozens of schools or independent districts. Localities that were successful in getting some collaboration with local schools were often not successful in partnering with all the schools or districts in their area. In some cases, organizers secured collaboration by approaching and recruiting individual school campuses rather than working at the district level. However, even in these situations, some were told that further approval at the district level was required, proving difficult and time consuming. Moreover, in large school districts, approaching each individual school could be an enormous and sometimes impractical undertaking.

As indicated in interviews and surveys, several stakeholders were concerned about the lack of greater involvement from schools or school districts because these institutions are closest to a target population for this count: homeless teens who attend school. During the process evaluation, TNOYS collected information from the Texas Homeless Education Office, but was not able to collect information directly from schools, district administrations, or relevant state agencies about the reasons schools were not more involved.

Those familiar with efforts made by localities participating in *Youth Count Texas!* to engage schools cited the absence of official endorsement from the Texas Education Agency, which may have caused teachers and administrators to fear “getting into trouble” if they participated. Others cited concerns by school personnel about protecting students’ privacy in terms of collecting personal information and students’ perceived wish to

keep their homeless status confidential. This is a common challenge; other researchers have written extensively about issues with involving schools in these projects due to schools’ understanding of the requirements of FERPA.¹¹ In addition, some count organizers reported that the survey instrument and the amount of time needed for out of class interviews raised concerns for their local school officials.

“Homeless liaisons from three of the larger districts in our county were a part of the planning committee [and] helped market the count. Two of the liaisons did not get permission from higher-ups in the district to post flyers in the school. The schools did, though, market the count in their community. The homeless liaisons were 100% on board with the count and wanted their homeless students to participate. However, when they took it up the chain, it was not permitted.”

TNOYS, TDHCA, and other stakeholders involved in the planning of *Youth Count Texas!* predicted that there would be challenges with securing school participation in the initiative. Asking schools to refer homeless students to complete the survey at a youth service agency was considered, but that strategy was ultimately not recommended due to safety concerns for schools associated with encouraging students to attend an off-campus event. Making the survey available online and asking school districts to send the link out to students was also considered, but there were concerns that the integrity of the data could be compromised if the survey was put online.

Whatever the reasons were for low school-related participation, the impact appears to be significant. Specifically, while only 1,007 individuals were surveyed as part of *Youth Count Texas!*, 113,294 homeless school children were identified by Texas school districts in 2014-2015.

This large disparity is partly explained by the fact that school districts report a number of youth experiencing homelessness cumulatively for the entire year, even if those children become housed at some point after being identified. By definition, a cumulative number is higher than a “snapshot” (i.e., point in time) count such as was done as part of *Youth Count Texas!*. However, looking at

the preliminary data it is hard to imagine how the cumulative as compared to snapshot data alone could explain a difference of such magnitude, and leads to the conclusion that many school-aged youth experiencing homelessness were missed.

This conclusion is also supported by comments made by project stakeholders. For example, one organizer believed strongly that her city’s count was primarily only finding youth who were already receiving some type of social services and that other youth were not being counted at all. Related to this (and the definition issues discussed elsewhere), some people involved in the project expressed a concern that project teams did not have the time and resources needed to find “couch surfing” youth experiencing homelessness

because they were less likely to hear about magnet events or be identified during a street count.

COMPETING PRIORITIES FOR SURVEY CONTENT AND LENGTH MAY HAVE AFFECTED PARTICIPATION AND UNDERScore POTENTIAL CONFLICT BETWEEN THE GOALS OF A NEEDS ASSESSMENT VERSUS A HOMELESS COUNT.

The survey instrument (as developed by TNOYS for TDHCA) was multiple pages long and contained questions which went beyond a youth's housing status. Some individuals involved in the project expressed concern about the length of the survey and the nature of the topics – which included some questions of a sensitive nature.

In fact, the content and length of the survey was a subject of debate in the *Youth Count Texas!* project during both Phase I and Phase II. Some stakeholders thought that the length of the survey and the inclusion of personal and possibly traumatic questions discouraged entities, such as schools, from collaborating more fully, and also may have discouraged some youth from completing the survey. Others argued that they were required to collect certain information, including information on certain health and mental health conditions, per HUD requirements for the PIT. Many stakeholders expressed a desire to use this initiative as an opportunity to gather detailed information to help policymakers better understand the needs of youth, and encouraged the inclusion of qualitative questions about youths' strengths and resiliency that some thought were superfluous.

TNOYS addressed this disagreement by building flexibility into the surveying process. As previously touched on, flexibility was built into the initiative by allowing communities to adapt their surveys if they used the *Youth Count Texas!* core data elements. Some communities chose to use shorter surveys. Additional flexibility was built into the surveying process directly by instructing interviewers to skip questions that youth reported they did not want to answer. TNOYS and TDHCA believed that this flexibility would help reduce any concerns or barriers to participation.

During both the piloting of the survey instrument and the implementation of *Youth Count Texas!*, there were reports from a handful of stakeholders that the survey was too long. However, there was not a single report made to TNOYS about a young person opting not to complete the survey because of its content or length during the pilot, the implementation phase, or the process evaluation. There were suggestions that schools may have been more likely to participate in the initiative if the survey had asked fewer personal questions; however, these suggestions were anecdotal remarks rather than formal decisions from leadership. The impact that a shorter survey would have had on *Youth Count Texas!* is unclear.

If depth in data collection and the level of survey participation acted as competing priorities, future youth count planners may be more successful choosing either a comprehensive needs assessment or an accurate count as their primary goal, or at least separating these objectives in the data collection process. For example, implementing a statewide count via a minimal survey and then completing an in-depth needs assessment via focus groups with a smaller sample of targeted youth may be a more effective strategy.

AMBIGUITY AND LACK OF AGREEMENT ON THE DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS MAY HAVE AFFECTED RESULTS.

Varying definitions of youth homelessness was a challenging aspect of the *Youth Count Texas!* project and may have contributed to the difficulty in reaching the entire target population of youth experiencing homelessness. For organizers and their partners familiar with conducting PIT counts for HUD, homelessness is more strictly defined as not having shelter in which to sleep, and more often applies to adults and some older youth. In contrast, the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness, which is typically used by those in the education and child welfare fields, includes all children and youth who do not have a permanent or stable home, even those who have a place to sleep, such as a with a friend or relative, or at a hotel or motel. The McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness is more inclusive of the teenage (or school-aged) homeless population.¹²

“Youth Count Texas! was a really good opportunity for us to engage with other organizations - either ones that we had not been engaged with for a long time or new partnerships.”

These differences have implications for count methodology and survey content. In spite of many efforts that were made by project leaders to ensure that a common and inclusive definition and expanded age range was used across the board for *Youth Count Texas!* (i.e., defining the data to be collected and disaggregated if necessary), there are indications that some counts were conducted without the expanded definition of homelessness in mind. Future counts can be strengthened by achieving consensus on the definition of homelessness and ensuring that the definition is communicated clearly to all organizers, partners, and volunteers.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION WAS IMPORTANT, ESPECIALLY BETWEEN YOUTH SERVICES ORGANIZATIONS AND HOMELESS COUNT EXPERTS.

Collaboration between groups that focus on the provision of youth services as their mission and groups that focus on ending homelessness as their mission proved to be an important aspect of the *Youth Count Texas!* project. For example, as mentioned previously, TNOYS subcontracted with THN to provide support during the project's implementation phase. TNOYS is Texas' statewide nonprofit organization focused on supporting youth and youth services. THN is Texas' statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to ending homelessness. The two organizations have different missions and areas of focus, so expertise from both groups was essential for the project's success as well as the institutional knowledge, networks, and relationships each brought to the project. The collaboration between TNOYS and THN on *Youth Count Texas!* may mirror much of the collaboration that is happening between youth service agencies and housing agencies across the country to address youth homelessness.

At the local level, homeless coalitions partnered with youth services organizations and other service groups to accomplish their counts. Some of these partnerships were new; others have existed for many years but were perhaps strengthened as a result of this initiative. Success in collaboration between local homeless coalitions and youth service

agencies depended in part on the willingness of the groups to work together in new ways for common purposes that may not specifically reflect their individual priorities. Count organizers and partners reported they were eager to continue to forge such relationships and that collaboration would be important for getting improved outcomes in future counts.

In addition, organizers reported they had successes and failures related to collaborating with other entities. For example, one youth services organization reported that participating in the project was a great opportunity for building and strengthening relationships with community stakeholders, citing collaboration with the public library and a partnership with a local support group serving LGBTQQ youth. Attempts to work collaboratively with local police and juvenile justice agencies had mixed results. Some count organizers worked in partnership with law enforcement; others reported that they hesitated to engage law enforcement in their counts due to concerns about the criminalization of homelessness. In other words, they did not want to lead law enforcement to hotspots with homeless youth, out of concern that the youth would then need to worry about being arrested. The challenges in partnering with schools were discussed earlier in the report.



"Being homeless is something you wouldn't want to be. Devastating. It gives you a deep, empty feeling inside." Kiontae, Dallas

RECOMMENDATIONS

Count organizers and other stakeholders reported that *Youth Count Texas!* was a worthwhile and exciting effort. They expressed a desire to participate in future youth counts and believe they can learn from their recent experiences to strengthen future efforts. Stakeholders also expressed specific challenges and shortcomings in this first *Youth Count Texas!* initiative. The youth count process can be improved by addressing these issues with process improvements that may build greater participation and momentum across the state.

Before time and energy are spent on identifying incremental process improvements for a future statewide youth count, some essential questions should be further explored and answered.

1) CLARIFY THE PURPOSE AND GOAL(S) OF A FUTURE YOUTH COUNT UP FRONT.

To coordinate efforts across a broad group of stakeholders, project goals must be clear. Based on the experiences of *Youth Count Texas!* stakeholders, further honing of the goals of a future effort would improve results. For example, it may help to clarify whether future youth counts will be more concerned with collecting information about the *numbers* or the *needs* of youth who are homeless. Clarifying priorities will allow project planners and implementers the opportunity to select the most appropriate methodology and develop the most appropriate strategies and tools. Moreover, if future youth counts need to be designed to collect both types of data results, it may be advisable to use more than one process and survey instrument. If future youth counts aim to collect more qualitative information about or from homeless youth, multiple strategies and approaches are likely needed.

2) DETERMINE WHETHER THE PIT COUNT WILL BE THE METHODOLOGY USED IN FUTURE YOUTH COUNTS.

Depending upon how goals are defined, a PIT count may or may not be the best data collection model to use. The PIT is designed to count persons experiencing homelessness, and there is an existing infrastructure in place to conduct these counts. In many cases, the PIT may be an ideal methodology for counting youth who are experiencing homelessness and collecting demographic data. On the other hand, youth may transition in and out of homelessness or be in different types of unstable housing arrangements over time. The impact of homelessness may linger even after they have housing. Focusing on finding only those youth who are experiencing homelessness by the HUD definition on a given day excludes countless youth who have been or will be affected by homelessness and housing instability. Measuring homelessness on a single night or at a single point in time through the PIT count or another count may be too narrow a methodology. Separate youth counts may be a better fit for understanding the longer-term impact of homelessness on youth. As discussed above, youth counts can be

implemented in a manner that is more appropriate for youth than the PIT count.

There may be opportunities to utilize the PIT count in conjunction with other methodologies. For example, information on youth homelessness exists in other forms and is already being collected by other groups, such as schools, that could be used instead of or in conjunction with future efforts to identify the numbers of homeless youth. If needs are not being assessed in that context, process improvements might be better focused there. Supplemental counts to capture information about youth experiencing homelessness who are not in school could be done in conjunction with annual PIT counts, as these individuals may be more likely to look and behave like homeless adults.

Careful analysis of the data collected in *Youth Count Texas!* may yield information that could help address the issue of count methodology. Some questions that arise from this youth count include: were older youth or youth not in school more often identified than younger youth or youth in school? Were youth more likely to be identified by certain methods than others? Did youth not in school have needs generally different than school-aged youth? A thorough analysis of the data collected by *Youth Count Texas!* is essential to making good decisions about how future counts or assessments are conducted.

3) CLARIFY THE DEFINITION TO BE USED FOR “HOMELESS YOUTH” IN FUTURE COUNTS AND ENSURE THAT ALL ORGANIZERS AND STAKEHOLDERS USE THE AGREED-UPON DEFINITION.

State legislators defined “homeless youth” for purposes of House Bill 679 as being under 19 years of age and did not explicitly include “couch surfers,” who are included in the federal McKinney-Vento law that defines homeless students.

To err on the side of being inclusive, the *Youth Count Texas!* survey was designed to include individuals up to age 24 and those in unstable or non-permanent housing, in addition to those who were living on the street or in a shelter. However, some stakeholders found it difficult to combine the process as set out in the survey design with their own ideas and practices about counting youth experiencing homelessness or the kinds of information they believed important to be collected. Since community participation in *Youth Count Texas!* was voluntary, there were few, if any, means to enforce standard compliance related to how localities conducted their counts on the ground.

Additional clarification is needed about how youth homelessness is defined, and future counts should build in more opportunities for input to ensure organizations and localities consistently apply the agreed-upon definitions.

4) IDENTIFY STRATEGIES TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION FROM SCHOOLS IN YOUTH COUNTS AND TO OBTAIN DATA RELATED TO YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS THROUGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS THAT ALREADY EXIST.

Stakeholders reported time and again that schools were a key part of this process. However, since schools are already required to collect data on homeless students, there may be untapped opportunities to leverage the data collected or the processes for engaging students experiencing homelessness already in place. For example, the annual data that schools report on homeless students in October may be a good proxy for data on homeless among school-aged youth and could therefore stand in for at least

a part of the youth count. In addition, if the content were determined to be acceptable, schools could administer a survey in the fall semester of the school year, in conjunction with McKinney-Vento assessment to identified students. Prior to the start of the next school year, a process should be initiated to debrief with school district and state level personnel as well as *Youth Count Texas!* project stakeholders regarding what went well and what can be done to address barriers reported by youth count organizers.

5) ONCE PROCEDURAL DECISIONS ARE MADE, ALLOW ADEQUATE PLANNING TIME FOR ORGANIZATIONS TO PREPARE FOR FUTURE COUNTS.

Nearly everyone involved in the *Youth Count Texas!* project reported needing more time to plan and prepare for their activities around counting homeless youth. Based on decisions inherent in the recommendations outlined above, and other factors such as available funding, a timeline should be developed that allows adequate time for local entities to recruit and train staff and volunteers. This would also allow the local entities to initiate or renew their relationships with key community collaborators such as schools, youth service agencies, and law enforcement or juvenile justice.

Several stakeholders suggested that adequate lead time for planning and implementing the next youth count would be at least 9 to 12 months. This timeframe would allow for local entities and project leaders to communicate adequately, anticipate resource needs, and work around their other priorities such as annual grant applications.



"It feels very weird and lonely to be homeless. I'm in AP classes, in the National Honor Society, and I'm a straight A student. I'm smart, and I want to have a future too." Julia, Fort Worth

CONCLUSION

From a process perspective, it's clear that there are many challenges and opportunities involved in trying to identify and count youth experiencing homelessness, and accurately and thoroughly assess their needs. Still, count organizers and other stakeholders reported that *Youth Count Texas!* was a worthwhile and eye-opening effort. They expressed a desire to be a part of future youth counts and believe they can learn from their recent experiences to strengthen future efforts.

The challenges associated with finding and counting youth experiencing homelessness are not unique to Texas, but are understood at the national level, as is the importance of identifying and supporting the needs of this population. HUD reports that:

The data being reported by HUD today on youth experiencing homelessness is a work in progress because communities are still learning how to collect this data accurately. Because of this, HUD cautions its partners and stakeholders from drawing conclusions regarding the state of youth homelessness based solely on this data. In order to continue to improve data on youth, HUD revised its data collection requirements, which may result in future increased point-in-time counts as communities improve their methodologies.

HUD is also working with communities to improve collection to better understand the size and scope of homelessness, including efforts like youth engagement and collaboration with schools and other youth-serving systems. In addition, HUD is in the process of improving and updating its year-long data collection on youth, and now also includes data from the U.S. Department of Education and American Housing Survey in its *Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*.¹³

Given that, Texas may be on the cutting edge of exploring how to improve collecting data that calls attention to the numbers and needs of youth experiencing homelessness, in Texas and across the country.

Allowing more time for planning and preparation, working with state education agencies and school districts to find more direct ways to collaborate for accurate youth counts, and clarifying certain aspects of the process would likely encourage future participation and improve data collection. In addition, further study of the challenges faced by individual communities as they participated in *Youth Count Texas!* and the solutions they found could identify specific strategies that might be applied across the board in future statewide youth counts or needs assessment efforts. If a future count of youth experiencing homelessness will be done in 2017, the time to begin making those determinations is now, while the lessons learned from 2016 are fresh and the momentum across Texas is growing.

ENDNOTES

- 1 A PIT is a “snapshot” of the homeless population in a geographic area. HUD PIT counts are performed on a single night in late January each year to identify mainly adults who are homeless. They are conducted across the nation and have been ongoing since 2005.
- 2 The surveys are included in Appendix A and are also available at:
<http://www.tnoys.org/yctoolkit/surveys/>
- 3 More information available at: <http://blogs.census.gov/2011/09/13/households-doubling-up/>
- 4 Pergamit, M., Cunningham, M., Burt, M., Lee, P., Howell, B., & Bertumen, K. (2013). Youth Count! process study. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Available online at http://www.urban.org/research/publication/youth-count-process-study/view/full_report
- 5 Horton-Newell, A., Meyer, K., Trupin, C. (2009). Runaway and homeless youth and the law: Model state statutes. American Bar Association Commission on Homelessness and Poverty. Retrieved from: http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/division_for_public_services/ABA_Runaway_eBook.authcheckdam.pdf
- 6 Auerswald, C., Lin, J., Petry, L., & Hyatt, S. (2013) Hidden in plain sight: An assessment of youth inclusion in point-in-time counts of California’s unsheltered homeless population. California Homeless Youth Project. Available online from http://cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov/docs/pdf/Hidden-in-Plain-Sight_FullReportFINAL.pdf
- 7 Pergamit, op.cit. p. 22
- 8 Note: According to Paul Boden, director of the Western Regional Advocacy Project, a homeless rights group, “Point-in-time counts are a minimum number, always. They undercount hidden homeless populations because homeless persons are doubling up with the housed (in the winter) or cannot be identified by sight as homeless.” Retrieved from <http://nationswell.com/point-in-time-survey-track-americas-homeless/#ixzz4B0mAy4u7>
- 9 Cavallaro, E. (2012) Counting an invisible population. Available on the National Alliance to End Homelessness website, online at <http://www.endhomelessness.org/blog/entry/counting-an-invisible-population#.V1hglXo0Or8>
- 10 Auerswald, op.cit., p. 30
- 11 Pergamit, op.cit. p. 47
- 12 Pergamit, op.cit. p. 47
- 13 More information available at: http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/press/press_releases_media_advisories/2015/HUDNo_15-149



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