

COUNT ME!

Hidden in Plain Sight: Documenting Homeless Youth Populations

September 2017

Bill Wilson Center

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Executive Summary

Before ending youth and family homelessness in Santa Clara County an estimate of the population to be served must first be determined. Bill Wilson Center, the leader in providing services to homeless youth and young adults (ages 13-25) set out to count the population in 2015, with 2017 being the base year for the actual count. Following is the report: Hidden in Plain Sight: Documenting Homeless Youth Populations.

Who Was Counted?

Two distinct counts took place for this report. The HUD Point-In-Time Count, took place during one day in January 2017. Second, a high school and community college survey was administered to a sampling of schools from Winter 2016 through Spring 2017. The process for completing these counts and the lessons learned from the counts are documented here. In addition to the two counts, this report documents other high risk populations for homelessness such as youth leaving foster care, youth in the criminal justice system, parenting youth, and youth identified as LGBTQ. Finally, the University of Southern California completed an in-depth study on the characteristics of 208 homeless street young adults to help identify a unique profile on this most vulnerable homeless population.

Findings

Homeless Student Survey

Seventeen percent (17%) of high school students surveyed in Santa Clara County indicated they were unhoused or knew another youth who was couch surfing, living on the street, or living in cars at the time of the survey. Total number for Santa Clara County: **13,250 high school students.**

Forty-four percent (44%) of community college students reported experiencing homelessness or knowing someone who was homeless sometime in past six months. **17,637 young adult students ages 18-25** were homeless sometime in the past six months.

2017 Point in Time Count of Homeless Youth

2,530 unaccompanied homeless youth and young adults were counted on January 24, 2017, an increase of 175% over the 2015 PIT count. (see Santa Clara County PIT report for more details)

2017 USC Report - Homeless Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey

208 homeless street youth were administered the Homeless Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey by researchers from USC. Highlights from this report include:

- 40% of the 208 youth qualified as chronically homeless
- 18% of the youth came from homeless families - homelessness is becoming a generational problem
- 45% were kicked out of family home
- 35% had spent time in foster care
- 43% had a caregiver in prison
- 25% were parents; 11% had children living with them

(see USC HYRRS Report for more details)

Next Steps

After counting the various populations in Santa Clara County the next step will be to develop a plan of action to end youth and family homelessness in Santa Clara County. It is our hope that the community, elected officials, homeless services organizations, businesses, and concerned residents will join Bill Wilson Center in developing a course of action to tackle youth and young adult homelessness. No young person should be without a place to call home.

Count Me!
Hidden in Plain Sight: Documenting Homeless Youth Populations

Homeless Youth and Young Adults in Santa Clara County

Homelessness is devastating for youth and young adults. Research shows they experience high rates of violence, sexual assault, substance abuse, physical illness, and behavioral disorders. They often cannot attend school, let alone graduate. To cope, many engage in drug use, prostitution, survival sex, or other illicit activities. Youth homelessness is associated with increased risk factors that directly affect public health and safety.

Once youth have entered street life, it is difficult to reenter mainstream society. Having dropped out of high school or not having held a job previously, most youth are at a loss as to how to overcome these obstacles. Lacking the skills, experience, and education to support themselves, they begin to engage in practices that perpetuate the cycle of poverty, violence and exploitation. They often resort to securing money, food, and shelter by panhandling, stealing, drug dealing, and survival sex.

Sexually exploited homeless youth rarely report their situation or seek help. California, and in particular the Bay Area, is a top destination point for trafficked victims. Our area's major harbors and airports, our strong economy and growing population, coupled with our large immigrant population make us an area with a high vulnerability to human trafficking. The majority of victims of human trafficking are women and children, with up to 50% being youth.



If we can reach youth early and provide them with needed services we can stop this spiral into a dangerous life on the streets and chronic homelessness.

Ending Youth Homelessness - Why Count?

In 2015, Bill Wilson Center's Board of Directors took up the challenge to end youth and young adult homelessness in Santa Clara County by 2020. But before we could end homelessness, we needed to know the scope of the problem. Was getting an accurate count using the Federal Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) definition for homelessness enough for our planning? No. While we were participating in the HUD Homeless Survey and Point-In-Time Count, that number was only part of the homeless population. With a $25,000 grant from a local donor, Bill Wilson Center staff took up the challenge to complete a comprehensive count of homeless youth in Santa Clara County by 2017.

There was no "how to count homeless youth" when we started the process in 2015. However, since that time, the Federal Health and Human Services Department contracted with Chapin Hall from the University of Chicago to complete a count of homeless youth in 22 communities using the HUD definition of homeless. In this document we share our counting process and "lessons learned" so that other communities can replicate our efforts. Woven throughout the document are the results of our three separate counts. We believe that combining our experience with Chapin Hall's Voices for Youth Count (VoYC) toolkit will help other communities do a better job estimating their homeless youth population.

Today, many communities are taking up the challenge to count homeless populations. In 2016, the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced that 2017 would be the base year for counting homeless youth in the bi-annual point in time surveys (PIT) of street and shelter homeless populations.

Who To Count

Who were we going to count? The federal government has many different definitions for homeless youth. HUD has a narrow definition that focuses on people living on the streets, in cars, or in shelters. Youth and families "doubled up" not by choice in housing or couch-surfing do not meet HUD's definition of homeless. On the other hand, the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act and the

federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act do include youth living unstably in someone else's house as homeless. Bill Wilson Center staff determined that we needed both numbers in order to establish a plan to end youth homelessness.

No one in Santa Clara County had tried to count the number of youth ages 14-25 that slept every night in another home away from their primary caregivers. Often referred to as "couch-surfers", these youth are just one bad incident away from street homelessness. We thought that if we could get a handle on the number of youth couch-surfing we could design programs to reach out to them to offer support before they fell into the street.

What Are the Risk Factors and Characteristics of the Population?

We also knew through the review of national research that many youth leaving foster care or the criminal justice system ended up homeless. So, we needed to estimate the various "pipelines" that fed into homelessness. We needed to estimate, or at least call out, these risk factors as part of the count. Furthermore, we wanted to estimate the characteristics of the homeless youth population including how many identify as LGBTQ, what is the racial makeup of the group, and how many were head of household for families with children. We set out to estimate all these numbers for our broad count.

Our "Count Me!" project includes: 1) a survey of couch-surfing high school and community college students; 2) an in-depth look at how we conducted our annual 2017 HUD PIT count; 3) a comprehensive risk factor survey of a sample of homeless young adults; and 4) an estimate of specific populations most at risk of homelessness including youth in foster care, the justice system, LGBTQ youth, single parents, and youth with behavioral health conditions.

We hope our paper will help other communities in counting homeless youth and young adults.

Youth and Young Adult Homelessness

While there was promising news in June of 2017 that the number of homeless in the United States had declined for the third consecutive year, the federal HUD PIT survey highlighted a troubling reality in Santa Clara County, California[1]. This region's homeless problem remains among the worst in the nation. In a detailed report released by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), San Jose/Santa Clara County posted the nation's fifth-highest homeless population. It also ranked among the places with the most chronically homeless young adults ages 18-24.[2] The 2017 Santa Clara County PIT Homeless Census and Survey found a total of 7,394 individuals experiencing homelessness. Of the homeless count numbers, 2,530 were unaccompanied homeless youth ages 25 and under. Of the homeless youth population, 2,021 were ages 18-25; 501 were minors under age 18. This represented an increase of 175% over the 2015 Point-In-Time Count. While the increase is alarming, we believe it is more a reflection of a better count and not necessarily a tripling of the homeless youth population.

The large increase reflects the efforts taken to systematically count homeless youth on the streets throughout Santa Clara County and not just focus on the urban center of the City of San Jose. Also, teams were trained to identify homeless youth "hot spots" before the day of the count.

Social-Economic Indicators in Santa Clara County

To understand the geographic impact on youth and young adult homelessness in Santa Clara County, a brief review of the social-economic indicators will provide some background on why we see such a large number of homeless youth and young adults.

Santa Clara County is located at the southern end of the San Francisco Bay Area and has distinct physical, economic, social and financial issues. With a population of 1,919,402, it is one of the most diverse counties in the nation and the sixth largest county in California. San Jose, the county seat, is a large, urban city with a population of

1 The 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress
2 Ibid

slightly over 1 million.[3] It lies 50 miles south of two other Bay Area cities: San Francisco (population 870,887) and Oakland (population 420,005).

Santa Clara County has the highest median household income in the nation at $93,500, with 45.4% of County households reporting incomes of $100,000 or more.[4] Yet despite this prosperity, economic opportunities are not extended to all in the region. San Jose's tech boom has resulted in rapid urbanization, including increased traffic, inflated housing costs, gentrification and displacement, and a deepening economic divide.

San Jose is the most "unaffordable major city in the U.S. and one of most unaffordable in the entire world."[5] With the wealth and economic boom comes the rising cost of housing; in Santa Clara County, the median price of a single family home has risen to $1.1 million, and the average apartment in San Jose costs $2,400 a month to rent.[6] This high cost of housing has increased the numbers of individuals living in one place.

Housing instability, common among low-income families in a high cost area, is a factor contributing to homelessness among youth and young adults served by Bill Wilson Center (BWC). Gentrification is causing rents to skyrocket putting a strain on low-income families and service workers earning low wages.

Social and Familial Indicators

Bill Wilson Center has served Santa Clara County's homeless and at-risk youth and young adults for over forty years, providing a continuum of essential services to help youth make the transition to stable and safe housing and self-sufficiency. Through our years of service, staff at BWC has gained a deep understanding of clients' needs and the problems lying at the root cause of youth homelessness, as well as their consequences. BWC regularly surveys its clients, who have cited poverty, lack of affordable housing, low education levels, unemployment, and mental health disabilities as contributing factors to their homelessness.

3 U.S. Census Bureau 2016 Population Estimates
4 U.S. Conference of Mayors, HIS Global Insight, 2014
5 13th annual Demographic International Housing Affordability Survey, July 2017.
6 Santa Clara County Association of Realtors, 5/2016



Our internal surveys show that many of our homeless youth report being discharged from child welfare placements or aged out of foster care and juvenile treatment/detention facilities without a safe alternative. Many report mental health and/or substance abuse disorders. A disproportionate number identify as LGBTQ and/or are youth of color.

In recent state and national surveys, estimates as high as 40% of homeless youth identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning (LGBTQ). In the same study, 88% indicated that they were ejected from their homes due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identify/expression. Among homeless families, 38% reported job loss as the primary cause of their homelessness; this was followed by family/domestic violence at 22% and increased rent at 20%.[7] Estimates indicate that youth exiting the child welfare and juvenile probation systems represent 18-22% of our County's homeless youth.

Bill Wilson Center

Established in 1973, Bill Wilson Center is a 501(c)3 community based organization that provides comprehensive supportive services to address the unmet needs of homeless youth and homeless families. BWC is the only agency in Santa Clara County to provide a continuum of services (shelter, access to health services, mental health and substance abuse treatment, housing, employment services, and more), particularly to transition-age youth, ages 16-24. BWC specializes in serving vulnerable, at-risk youth and their families, most of who are low income and have factors that create/lead to behavioral health issues, high-risk and criminogenic behaviors, and homelessness. A number of the youth, and parents, have been involved with the foster care, juvenile justice, and/or mental health systems. Homelessness, abuse, poverty, domestic violence, and substance abuse are common factors that are

7 2017 Point In Time Count/Survey Santa Clara County, Calif

addressed. BWC's history of program creation and implementation illustrates our commitment to serving Santa Clara County's most vulnerable populations.

With a goal of ending youth and family homelessness by 2020, Bill Wilson Center programs assist youth and families at risk of becoming homeless, or who are homeless, in moving to self-sufficiency by promoting self-direction and self-determination. Affirming the diversity of our community, services are developed that serve the unique cultural and linguistic needs of youth and families as well as develop targeted services for LGBTQ youth. In addition, Bill Wilson Center continues to advocate for policies that enable clients to achieve independence, secure housing, find employment and lead a healthy life.

Why Is It So Hard to Get an Accurate Youth Count?

Estimates of the number of homeless youth/young adults vary widely from county to county, state to state, from tens of thousands to over a million.[8] Homeless or unhoused youth and young adults are very difficult to count as they are a hidden population – homeless in plain sight. In addition, homeless youth and young adults are mobile and transient, hanging out with friends or staying in groups. Add to that the fact that many homeless youth don't want to be found. Some are fleeing an abusive family situation and others fear being placed in the foster care system or being arrested for trying to survive on the streets. Most aren't connected to services such as the child welfare, juvenile justice, or mental health systems although they may have been earlier in their lives. Rather than seeking services, many choose to avoid service sites such as drop-in centers or homeless shelters as to not be discovered.



The youth and young adult homeless population is very resilient – and able to find places where they'll be able to put themselves up for a couple of weeks or a couple

8 Urban Institute, Counting Homeless Youth, 2013

months at a time. The "couch surfers" of the county often stay with a friend for a couple days, a girlfriend or boyfriend for a week or two, and maybe bunk in with distant relatives. It's a transient population that doesn't stay still, they move around and don't often connect to services until a crisis hits.

Homeless Youth and Young Adult Count Strategy

As part of the agency's goal of ending youth and young adult homelessness in Santa Clara County by 2020, Bill Wilson Center developed specific strategies to maximize the accuracy of a homeless youth and young adult count. The comprehensive plan to establish a baseline count of those who are unhoused as well as those who are living on the streets involved three specific counts and surveys which were completed in 2017:

- Bill Wilson Center's Homeless Student Survey
- Santa Clara County's 2017 Point-In-Time Count and Survey
- University of Southern California's Homeless Youth Risk & Resiliency Survey

Bill Wilson Center's Homeless Student Survey

Every California school is required by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 to identify and report homeless students; however, there isn't a formal process. Many schools only attempt to identify homeless students during registration at the beginning of the school year. Bill Wilson Center, as a means to strengthen the baseline number of homeless youth and young families in Santa Clara County, consulted with *YouthCatalytics*, a nationally known research and evaluation agency out of Charlotte, Vermont. *YouthCatalytics* was the lead for Connecticut's 2015 Homeless Youth Estimation Project, which was designed to provide a reliable estimate on the number of youth in any given school district who had left home and were living somewhere else – a car, a friend's house, with a relative – temporarily. The goal of the project was to inform public policy regarding services to unstably housed/unhoused

young people, provide much-needed statistical information to local agencies that work with at-risk and homeless youth, and improve the ability of schools and community-based agencies to develop services and obtain funding for them. The Homeless Youth Estimation Project employed an innovative approach. Assuming that young people have unique and invaluable insight into the struggles of their peers, it questioned students directly (rather than guidance counselors or administrators) about local youth transience and homelessness.[9]

The results indicated high rates of youth disconnection from stable, permanent homes. Contrary to the popular notion that youth homelessness is primarily about young people living in abandoned buildings, this research suggests that homelessness is in fact a broad phenomenon existing on an extended continuum.[10]

With *YouthCatalyltics'* approval, we modified their student survey and teachers' guide to use in Santa Clara County schools. The survey was distributed to six high schools from both high and low income areas (including one private school), and two community colleges during the 2016-2017 academic year. A total of 3,442 surveys were collected from the high schools and analyzed in May and June of 2017. Due to the large numbers attending the two community colleges, Survey Monkey was used to distribute the survey to the college attendees. Some of the questions were modified to fit the Survey Monkey format.

Homeless High School Students

The survey's instructions asked high school students to identify anyone who was 19 years or younger and who was in an unstable living situation, regardless of whether they attend the respondent's particular high school or not. "Someone" was defined as being in an unstable living situation if he/she left home (whether he/she wanted to leave or because they were kicked out), and if he/she was separated from their family and living somewhere else temporarily (i.e. shelter, with friend(s), vehicle). This definition

9 YouthCatalytics, 2015 Homeless Youth Estimation Project
10 Ibid

was adapted from the McKinney-Vento Act. Duplication was avoided by deleting surveys that had the same identifier (initials).

The survey asked students to specify the location or type of setting that the youth they knew to be in an unstable living situation was residing, as well as the length of time the youth had been in the unstable living situation. This question was used to assess the housing and support resources that are available to the youth, as well as to which risks the youth may be exposed. Of the students surveyed, the majority of the identified homeless were male 65.57%, 29.82% females, and 4.39% transgender. However, we believe that the higher number of males reported may be due to one of the schools having an all-male population. The living situations of students can be found on the graph at the end of this section.

Seventeen percent (17%) of high school students surveyed indicated they were unhoused or knew another youth that was; that is, doubled up, couch surfing, living in vehicles, or on the streets. Many homeless students are "couch-surfing" (moving from place to place without a permanent home) and not staying in shelters or sleeping outdoors. They are experiencing homelessness due to poverty, family alienation or disruption, and the lack of other resources. Clearly the mask of stability provided to students by their schools cannot remove the instability of homelessness. Taking into account there are approximately 77,935 students currently enrolled in high schools throughout Santa Clara County, 13,250 students may be part of the hidden homeless!

Homeless High School Students in Other Communities

Student homelessness is not just a Santa Clara County issue. In a recent homeless student report, "*Homelessness in High School: Population-representative Rates of Self-Reported Homelessness, Resilience, and Risk in Philadelphia*", data was used from the Philadelphia Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) to estimate the prevalence of youth homelessness and risk for problems in the areas of victimization, binge drinking, serious substance use, and mental health. About 16.3% of all Philadelphia School District-enrolled youth reported having experienced homelessness at some point in their lives, and 11.7% reported current or recent homelessness.

In 2015, *YouthCatalytics* surveyed 5,439 students in Connecticut. Seventeen percent (17%) of their students were identified as homeless or unstably housed.[11]

A 2010 study of homeless high school students in a Colorado school district completed by John M. Cumming and Gene W. Gloeckner out of the University of Colorado found that 22.2% of the students overall reported being homeless during the school year, with 14.2% of the students surveyed being homeless with their immediate family.[12]

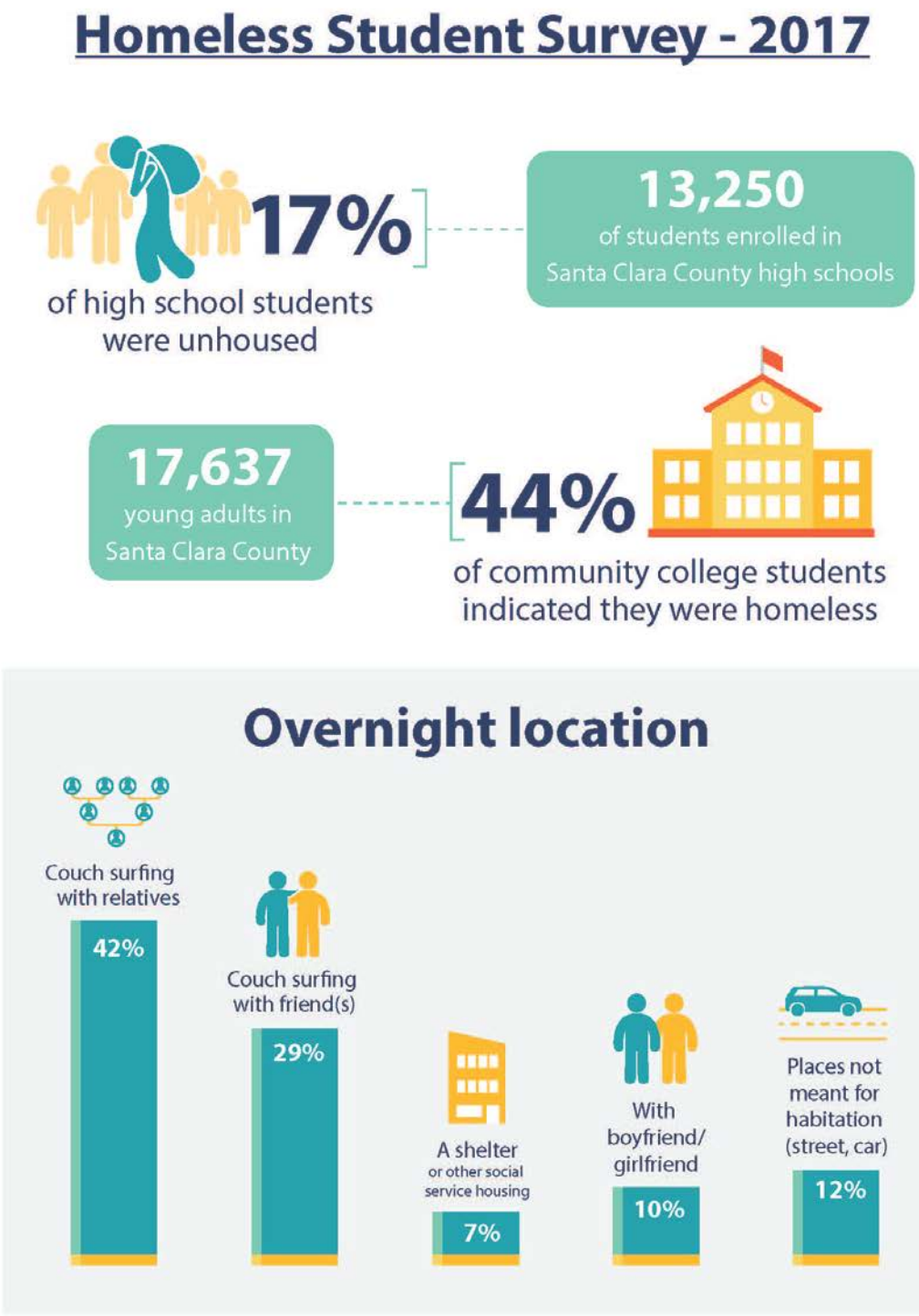
Homeless Students From Community Colleges

We surveyed two out of eight Santa Clara County community colleges. Forty-four percent (44%) of community college students indicated they were homeless. Of the 80,172 total students, 50% are between the ages of 18 and 24 years. Approximately 17,637 young adults may be part of this hidden homeless population.



School identification efforts such as BWC's Homeless Student Count shed light on the true extent of youth homelessness, empowering schools and communities to respond. To help youth experiencing homelessness, we need to know who they are. As long as homeless students remain invisible, no action can be taken inside or outside the classroom to provide the supports that are necessary to end their homelessness.

11 Ibid
12 Cumming and Gloeckner, University of Colorado, 2006.


Homeless Student Survey - 2017
17%
of high school students were unhoused
13,250
of students enrolled in Santa Clara County high schools
17,637
young adults in Santa Clara County
44%
of community college students indicated they were homeless
Overnight location
Couch surfing with relatives
42%
Couch surfing with friend(s)
29%
A shelter
or other social service housing
7%
With boyfriend/ girlfriend
10%
Places not meant for habitation (street, car)
12%

2017 Point-In-Time Count – Homeless Census & Survey

Getting an accurate count of homeless youth and families is difficult because, as one advocate put it, "youth are very good at hiding." Since 2011, Bill Wilson Center has worked with the City of San Jose and Santa Clara County to develop assessment strategies that better captured homeless youth numbers in the annual Point-In-Time counts performed as a part of the County's HUD-mandated Homeless Census and Survey.[13] As a result of these efforts, the Homeless Census and Survey increased outreach to homeless youth and created a methodology known as a "targeted youth count." Applied Survey Research (ASR) is the social research firm funded by the county and City of San Jose to conduct the local PIT counts. Bill Wilson Center worked in conjunction with ASR to conduct the 2017 Santa Clara County Homeless Census and Survey – Youth Count. ASR has extensive experience in homeless enumeration and needs assessment. ASR conducts the HUD PIT counts for nine other Bay Area counties. The 2017 PIT count took place on Tuesday, January 24.

PIT Count Implementation

Discussion began in November 2016 between BWC's Youth Count Coordinator and ASR staff to implement improved data collection techniques and methods for counting the homeless youth population in Santa Clara County. Because 2017 was a base year for counting homeless youth, Bill Wilson Center stepped up to provide staff



13 PIT counts are a critical source of data on the number and characteristics of people who are homeless in the United States. These data are used to measure homelessness on a local and national level and are published annually on HUD's HUD Exchange website, which can be viewed by CoCs and the general public. PIT count data are also provided annually to Congress as part of the Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR). The AHAR is used by Congress, HUD, other federal departments, and the general public to understand the nature and extent of homelessness. HUD's PIT count data has become increasingly important as a measure of our local and national progress related to preventing and ending homelessness, especially with relation to our progress towards meeting the goals of Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness.

support for the youth count. ASR and BWC staff worked together to adjust the final survey instrument for the youth count so it was more "youth friendly."

Bill Wilson Center offered street outreach staff to assist in implementing the 2017 targeted youth count. Client information, coupled with the expertise and experience of our outreach workers, resulted in a list of homeless youth "hot spots" including riverbeds, local parks, eating establishments, coffee shops, and shopping centers. BWC's outreach staff also spearheaded the targeted count activities at homeless encampments located throughout Santa Clara County, which provided valuable information for the survey as to the number of young people living among older adults. In addition to the youth homeless "hot spots" identified by the BWC's outreach team, local police mapping of homeless sites was also incorporated into the targeted outreach areas.

BWC's street outreach team identified ten known "hot spots" where outreach activities were most effective due to the large numbers of homeless youth and young adults known to congregate there. The Bill Wilson Center Drop-In Center in downtown San Jose serves as a base of operations for our Street Outreach Program, which is often the first point of contact for homeless youth and young adults likely to enter Bill Wilson Center programs. The Drop-In Center was designated as the 2017 PIT Youth Count deployment site.

To get the project started, BWC conducted a focus group with ten street youth who were familiar with local homeless youth hangouts. The plan was for these youth to become "youth leads" for the street count; they would be accompanied by DIC staff to form youth count teams. ASR provided a monetary incentive ($50.00) to the youth for their participation in the focus group, as well as dinner. Youth volunteering to become "youth leads" for the count received $15.00 per hour. Drop-In Center staff met individually and as a group with these ten young individuals. The goal was to motivate the youth to participate fully in the count, train them on outreach and who to count, as well as having them understand the importance of an accurate count and how services were linked to the count. The monetary incentive was useful in assuring youth participation.

Mapping Out Hot-Spots

The next step was identifying and mapping out homeless youth/young adult "hot spots" in the county. We completed this in early January with the ten young individuals, Drop-In Center staff and ASR using a large county map. DIC staff then visited the various "hot spots" to gain more information on their locations, driving instructions, any unique aspects to be aware of, as well as what safety precautions might be needed. The decision to use BWC's Drop-In Center staff and the outreach team, rather than volunteers, paired with the youth, had many benefits. Clearly the staff were familiar with "who to count", knew where most of the "hot spots" were located, and most importantly, had strong, positive relationships with the youth. For example, there was little, if any, fear from the youth that staff would violate their trust by sharing information about homeless locations with authorities.

Time of Count



The Count was originally planned to start at 3 p.m. and end at 7 p.m. on January 24, 2017. After discussion with our youth leads, the hours were changed to 1 p.m. to 8 p.m. According to the youth, more street youth would be out and about during this time. In addition, the paired teams (staff and youth leads) covering the most Northern and Southern areas of the county, began their count from the outer most borders and worked their way towards the Drop-In Center located in downtown San Jose at the center of the map. We also had teams starting at the Drop-In Center working their way towards the outer edge of the County borders, meeting the other teams at mid-point. Some teams went by light rail, others by bus, automobile, and some by foot. By the end of the time allotted for the Youth Street Count, we had 1,148 homeless youth and young adults counted by the teams.

ASR continued the youth count by surveying homeless shelters and encampments not reached by the youth teams, as well as counting homeless youth from the McKinney-Vento Liaisons' reports. The ASR number was added to the count done by the youth teams.

ASR Survey and Youth Surveyors

BWC's Drop-In Center recruited five "youth surveyors", street youth who were trained by ASR to survey fifty (50) homeless youth and young adults following the actual Point-In-Time Youth Count. It was determined that survey data would be more easily collected if an incentive gift was offered to respondents in appreciation for their participation. Socks were given to the participants which proved to be widely accepted among the survey respondents. The youth surveyors were compensated for their time with $7.00 per completed survey. Forty-eight youth completed the in depth survey however Bill Wilson Center wanted an even more in depth survey to be completed on street youth. To get a better look at the homeless youth population, the University of Southern California (USC) was recruited to administer this more extensive survey.

2017 PIT Youth Count Results

The 2017 Santa Clara County PIT count found a total of 7,394 individuals experiencing homelessness. 5,471 individuals were unsheltered, which included 2,298 young adults ages 18-24. Access to affordable housing was the primary cause for homelessness (62%). **The 2017 survey identified 2,530 unaccompanied children and transition-age youth experiencing homelessness. This represents an increase of more than 175% since 2015.**[14]

Despite the significant increase in the number of homeless youth and young adults, it does not suggest a complete count of those experiencing homelessness in the county, but a base number of people located during a seven-hour period, and represents only one measure of the human and housing crisis facing the county.

14 Because accurate counts on the number of homeless, including unaccompanied youth, are difficult as the homeless often stay in locations where they cannot be seen or counted, counts are usually considered conservative.

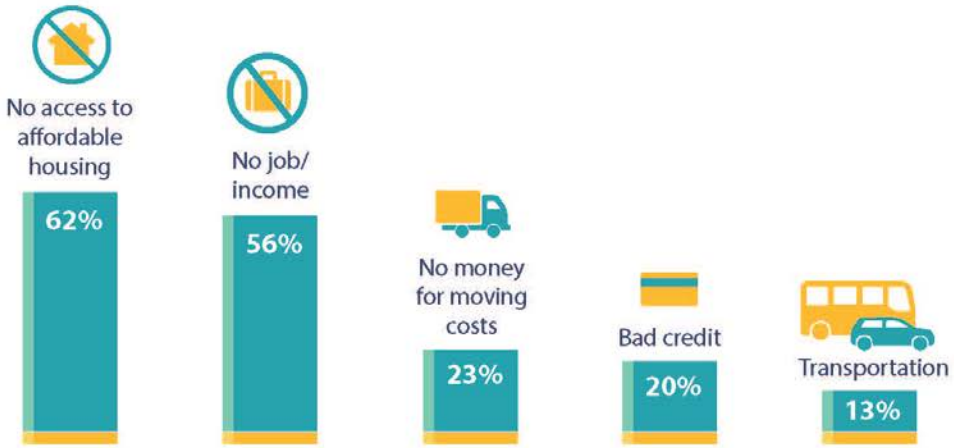
2017 Point-In-Time Count Homeless Census & Survey

2,530 unaccompanied children and transition age youth experiencing homelessness



This represents an **increase** of more than **175%** since 2015.

Obstacles to Permanent Housing



University of Southern California
Homeless Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey

In the Fall of 2016, Sparky Harlan, CEO of Bill Wilson Center attended a presentation by Dr. Eric Rice of the University of Southern California on the results of the Homeless Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey that has been administered to homeless youth adults ages 18-24 in six cities throughout the United States. The results painted a unique understanding of who these youth were and what risk factors they possessed. That afternoon Ms. Harlan convinced USC to come to San Jose to administer the HYRRS to our homeless youth. USC agreed to send a team of researchers to San Jose the first week of January 2017 to administer the survey and to train BWC staff to complete the surveys to reach 200 youth.

Early January 2017, Bill Wilson Center entered into a MOU with the University of Southern California School of Social Work, specifically with researcher Robin Petering, MSW and Dr. Eric Rice to conduct research on homeless young adults in San Jose between the ages of 18 and 24 who had reported housing instability within the previous 30 days. Robin Petering is a PhD candidate in the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work. Her research interests center on understanding the social determinants of risk behaviors among vulnerable youth. She is a co-primary investigator on a multi-city study assessing the health risks and resiliency of homeless and unstably housed young people.

Surveying homeless young adults in San Jose was one of multiple city assessments conducted by Ms. Petering and her team with the goal of promoting understanding around the lives of homeless youth. In addition, the survey responses would help in developing future programs, policies, interventions and research to support the homeless youth population and promote healthy behavior. The other cities in this research project included Los Angeles, Phoenix, Denver, Houston, St. Louis, and New York.

According to Ms. Petering, to fully address youth homelessness, a comprehensive and up to date understanding of the behaviors, demographics, experiences, and sources of resiliency is necessary. To address this need, Ms. Petering and her team used the Homeless Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (HYRRS) to assess the risks of homeless youth and young adults. The HYRRS is an assessment tool that provides in depth detail on experiences of young people which provided insight into differences and similarities across cities and communities.

For the San Jose data collection site, the USC research team was able to collect an initial sample and train Drop-In Center staff to administer the remaining surveys. A total of 208 surveys were collected. The study consisted of two parts: a self-administered main survey and a self-administered social network survey (SNS). Research assistants and/or Drop-In Center staff were available at all times while the young person was completing the survey to answer questions or resolve technical issues.

Youth participation was voluntary, and the youth received $20 for their time. Participants completed the survey using a computer based program where youth could either read the questions or listen to them on headphones.

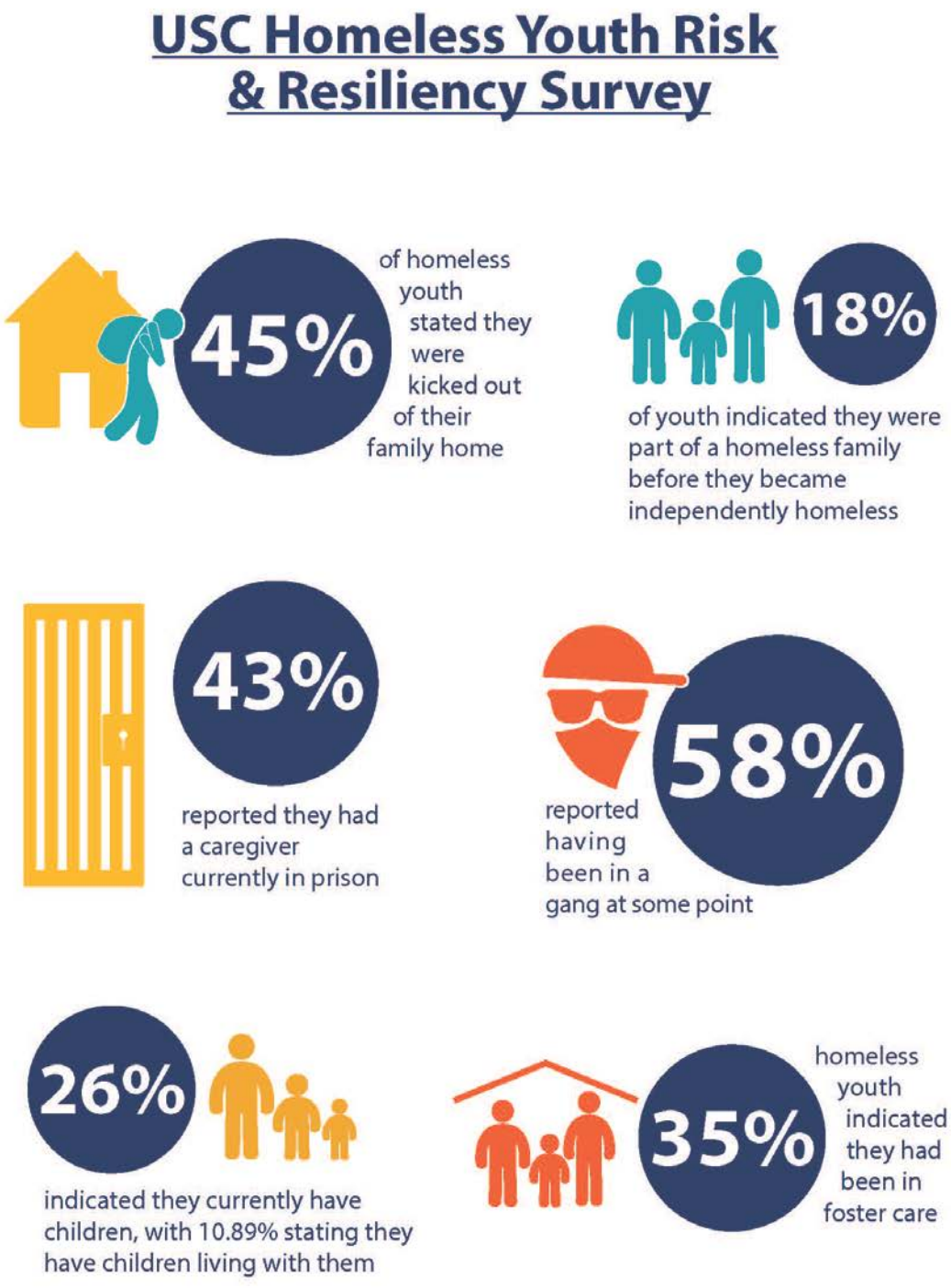
The youth were told that the purpose of the study was to better understand risk behaviors in young adults who were unhoused. The research team wanted to better understand how things like stress, emotions, coping, and social supports influence risk behaviors like using substances or having risky sex. Youth participants signed a consent to participate in the project.

A research brief "*Homeless Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey*", authored by Robin Petering, MSW, reflected the current landscape of youth homelessness in San Jose, California.

Reasons for Youth's Homelessness

There were a number of reasons identified for the youths' homelessness. According to the data drawn from the HYRRS surveys, 45% of homeless youth stated they were kicked out of their family home and 10.5% were kicked out of relative's home

as a cause of their homelessness. Interesting to note is that 18% of the youth indicated that they were part of a homeless family before they became independently homeless; a growing trend throughout the United States. Forty-three percent (43%) reported that they had a caregiver currently in prison. Furthermore, 58% reported having been in a gang at some point. The researcher noted that gangs often fill in as "drop-in centers" providing food, clothing, and emotional support.


USC Homeless Youth Risk & Resiliency Survey
45%
of homeless youth stated they were kicked out of their family home
18%
of youth indicated they were part of a homeless family before they became independently homeless
43%
reported they had a caregiver currently in prison
58%
reported having been in a gang at some point
26%
indicated they currently have children, with 10.89% stating they have children living with them
35%
homeless youth indicated they had been in foster care

Other Vulnerable Populations At Risk of Homelessness

Unfortunately, while the Point-In-Time counts those on the streets or in shelters, it does little to track those youth and young adults who are grappling with housing insecurity – the very people which may be counted among this county's homeless during the next Point-In-Time survey. No matter which data you look to, it is indisputable that children and youth make up a large percentage of the Santa Clara County homeless population.

Some segments of the county's youth population are at greater risk of becoming homeless. A great many youth in foster care, criminal justice, and/or mental health systems become homeless when they transition out without the support and opportunities for housing and employment they need. For example, the HYRRS report showed that 11.5% of homeless youth and adults ended up homeless after leaving the justice system. Nationally, estimates of former foster youth who are homeless are generally 20% or greater.[15] In California, one in four emancipated youth are homeless.[16]

Another vulnerable population of homeless youth includes youth and young adults who identify as LGBTQ. There are estimates that as many as 40% of homeless youth and young adults fall into this population. In addition, a rising vulnerable population involves pregnant and parenting youth – youth with children of their own.

Foster Care Youth

Foster care is intended to provide temporary, safe living arrangements and supportive services for children and youth who cannot remain safely at home due to child maltreatment or severe neglect. The goal of the system is to safely reunite children with their parents. However, too often this goal is not achieved. Instead, many children spend years in foster homes or group homes, often moving multiple times.

15 Human Rights Watch, My So-Called Emancipation: From Foster Care to Homelessness for California Youth 2010
16 Ibid

According to the USC report, 34.65% of the homeless youth surveyed indicated they had been in foster care, with the average number of placements being six.

This is what homelessness looks like to a youth……

On her 18th birthday, a young woman is told to leave her foster home. She now lives in a schoolmate's van.

A single parent young mother with a 3 year old is living in her car as there is no vacancy in transitional housing programs.

Just released from Juvenile Hall, a young man has no place to call home and no family to support him. He now sleeps under an overpass.

A young woman leaves her abusing boyfriend and finds herself with no place to live; she ends up staying in her car.

These children are at increased risk for a variety of emotional, physical, behavioral, and academic problems. While the number of children in care has decreased substantially in the U.S. and California over the previous decade, California continues to have the largest number of children entering the foster care system according to Kids Count Data Center (2016). Currently there are approximately 1,260 youth in Santa Clara County who are in a foster home or in group home care, with 29% being between the ages of 16 and 21. While exact estimates vary, research suggests that somewhere around 20% of the approximately 20,000 youth leaving foster care nationally each year will become homeless; which would be 252 foster youth in Santa Clara County who are at risk of becoming homeless.

The Congressional Research Study, "Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics, Programs and Emerging Issues", estimated one in five former foster youth have experienced homelessness within four years of exiting the foster care system. For older youth who leave foster care and/or group homes with no job or income, few educational prospects, and little emotional support or community connections, emancipation can mean homelessness.

Too many system youth face poverty, early pregnancy, academic failure, victimization, or incarceration in early adulthood. Clearly, homelessness, with its inherent dangers – exposure to sexual predators, drugs and alcohol, STDs and

HIV/AIDS, and street violence – is probably the worst outcome for any young individual. Drug use also appears prevalent among the runaway and homeless youth population. A SAMHSA study found that nearly 30% of homeless youth used marijuana and almost one-quarter used an illicit drug other than marijuana[17]. California's own Department of Social Services concluded that 65% of emancipating youth lack safe and affordable housing at the time of emancipation.[18]

Even though services for foster youth may be extended up to age 21, there still remains a number of former foster youth who end up on the streets in Santa Clara County. As the HYRRS survey discovered, a high percentage of these youth experience inadequate housing, low educational and career attainment, early parenthood, substance abuse, physical and mental health problems, and involvement with the criminal justice system and/or gang involvement. Bill Wilson Center's Drop-In Center served approximately 850 unduplicated homeless youth and young adults in 2016. Sixty-two percent (62%) indicated they had been in the foster care or juvenile justice system at some point in time, some in Santa Clara County and others in areas across the United States.

Juvenile Justice Youth/Young Adult Offenders

According to Greenberg, GA, Rosenheck, Ra (2008), "too often homelessness and incarceration are often correlated, and without stable housing, individuals are at greater risk of juvenile justice and criminal justice system involvement."

A recent study interviewed runaway and homeless youth in eleven U.S. cities and found that 44% had been in a jail, prison, or juvenile detention center, 78% had at least one interaction with the police, and 62% had been arrested at some point in their lives.[19] Homeless youth are more likely to have contact with the juvenile justice system

17 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Substance Abuse Among Youth Who Had Run Away From Home.
18 California Department of Social Services, 2015 Demographic Report
19 Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau: Street Outreach Program Data Collection Project Final Report (April 2016).

for offenses such as loitering, camping, and panhandling.[20] Most homeless youth do not have the funds to pay the fines for such violations, which results in the issuance of a warrant for their arrest. Their offenses are generally non-violent but recurring, likely as a result of their lack of stable homes and frequent moves.

One of the results of being homeless is that some youth engage in illegal activities in exchange for food or shelter. Some youth resort to survival sex, or selling drugs in exchange for a place to stay or as a means to earn money to pay for food or shelter. Others become easy prey for traffickers. And some join gangs as a way of belonging to a "family".

Many youth experience homelessness on their own, without a parent or guardian to help guide their behavior and negotiate with law enforcement if they become involved in the justice system[21]. Other youth become homeless upon, or soon after, their release from juvenile justice facilities with no stable home to return to. At least two studies of California youth found that 25% of youth exiting juvenile detention, stayed on the street or in a shelter their first night out of the system.[22]

Youth who have contact with the juvenile justice system are at increased risk for a number of negative long-term outcomes—such as injury, substance use and dependency, dropping out of school, gang involvement, early pregnancy, and homelessness—when compared with the general youth population.[23]



20 Sedlak & Bruce, 2010
21 National Center for Homeless Education, 2011.
22 Nellis, Ashley, and Hooks Wayman, Richard. Back on Track: Supporting Youth Reentry from Out-of-Home Placement to the Community, 2009, Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Coalition.
23 PolicyforResults.org. (n.d.). Prevent juvenile delinquency.

LGBTQ Homeless Youth

Lesbian and gay youth are overrepresented in the homeless population. In five studies of unaccompanied youth in mid-size and large cities, between 20% and 40% of respondents identified as gay or lesbian.[24] Based on the approximate 2,500 homeless youth in Santa Clara County, 500 to 1,000 are LGBTQ.



For these hundreds of homeless, disconnected LGBTQ youth in Santa Clara County, daily life is fraught with perils that no child should have to face. Severe harassment, physical and sexual harm, rejection from family, and the prospect of not knowing where they will sleep at night significantly harms the health and well-being of these youth. LGBTQ youth face a particular set of challenges, more so if they are also homeless or trying to avoid homelessness. Nationwide, we are seeing a new epidemic of homeless LGBTQ youth largely because youth are coming out earlier. In fiscal year 2015-2016, approximately 32% of the youth accessing services at BWC self-identified as LGBTQ. Of the 850 unduplicated transition-age youth served by the Drop-In Center during this time period, 264 self-identified as LGBTQ. Of these youth, 68% were currently, or had been, in the foster care or juvenile justice system at some point in their lives. Youth of color were over-represented, with 52% of youth served being Latino, 18% African American and 3% Asian.

The majority of youth from this same survey (88%) reported that they were ejected from their homes due to their sexual orientation/gender identity. All surveyed

24 Nicholas Ray, Lesbian, Gay, and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and National Coalition for the Homeless, 2006, pp. 12-14.

youth acknowledged that they have been participating in "risky" behaviors such as drug use, sex trafficking, pan-handling, unprotected sexual behaviors, and criminal activities.

In 2015-2016, BWC provided outreach and engagement services to 464 LGBTQ youth, and connected 200 to comprehensive services through our Drop-In Center. This included housing access/support, mental health support, physical health services, life skills and employment development, educational services, peer counseling, case management, and for some, family reconnection services. Research shows that families, parents, foster parents/caregivers and guardians can have a very dramatic impact on their LGBTQ children.[25] Family rejection has a serious impact on a gay or transgender young person's risk for health and mental health problems, according to Dr. Caitlin Ryan, founder of the Family Acceptance Project.[26]

Pregnant and Parenting Young-Parent Families

Many of the same risk factors that place youth at risk for homelessness are strong predictors of early and unplanned pregnancies among young, homeless women. Haley et al. found that homeless women 14 to 25 years of age who became pregnant were more likely to have experienced intra-familial incest, sexual abuse at an early age, and more severe sexual abuse than young, homeless women who do not become pregnant. Homeless young women are almost five times more likely to become pregnant and far more likely to experience multiple pregnancies than housed young women.[27] They tend to initiate sexual intercourse at a much earlier age, have a greater likelihood of multiple sex partners, report inconsistent condom or other contraception use, and have sex while intoxicated according to the same report.

25 Caitlin Ryan, *Family Acceptance of LGBT Adolescents Protects Against Depression, Substance Abuse and Suicidal Behavior,* 2010, 2016.
26 The Family Acceptance Project was designed to strengthen and help ethnically and religiously diverse families support their LGBT children, inform public and family policy, and develop a new evidence-based family model of wellness, prevention, and care to promote well-being for LGBT youth.
27 Greene J, Ringwalt C. Pregnancy among three national samples of runaway and homeless youth. J Adolescent Health. 1998 Dec;23(6):370–377.

Homeless Families

Homelessness does not only pertain to single men and women, but in reality thousands of families a year will experience homelessness. In fact, 41% of the homeless population nationally is comprised of families (National Alliance to End Homelessness). Homelessness is a life-altering experience for families; it is devastating. It disrupts every aspect of family life, damaging the physical and emotional health of family members, interfering with children's education and development, and domestic violence racks the very core of family life.

Of the youth surveyed by the University of Southern California, 25.49% indicated they currently have children, with 10.89% stating they had children living with them. National data from 2016 suggested that 35% of all persons experiencing homelessness are persons in families. According to the 2017 Santa Clara County PIT, families experiencing homelessness were not much different from families in poverty. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the risk of homelessness is highest among households headed by single women and families which children under the age of six.[28]

The PIT counted a total of 294 families with children experiencing homelessness. A total of 1,075 individuals were living in these families. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the families were unsheltered, an increase from previous years. According to the authors of the PIT report, the increase in the numbers was a result of the inclusion of data from the school McKinney Vento liaisons as they gathered data on families that are staying in hotels, garages, doubled up or other areas on private property that count teams were not able to access. It is important to note the homeless families identified in this count do not include families living doubled or tripled



28 US Department of Health and Human Services, 2007,Characteristics and Dynamics of Homeless Families with Children

up in households. Many have been forced to move in with relatives, sleep in cars or resort to overflowing shelters.

According to the PIT count report, 33% of individuals in families with children reported experiencing domestic violence in the past, and 6% reported they were currently experiencing domestic violence at the time of the survey. Twenty-six percent (26%) of the families with children indicated that divorce, break-up or separation was the reason for their homelessness.

Youth With History of Behavioral Challenges

Young people with a history of mental disorders face great adversity in life. Nearly 40% of youth with mental disorders either drop out of high school, have unplanned pregnancies, take to drugs or alcohol and become convicted criminals.[29] Many of these troubled youth inevitably become runaways or are abandoned to the streets without a place to call home. Homelessness and mental illness have long been linked. For some, their mental illness has resulted in homelessness. Risk factors that result in a young person becoming homeless and/or the risk factors inherent in being a homeless youth, increase exponentially the likelihood of developing a mental health problem.[30]

As studies indicate, many homeless youth leave home after years of physical and sexual abuse, strained relationships, addiction of a family member, and/or parental neglect. Neglect, physical abuse, custodial interference, and sexual abuse are types of child maltreatment that can lead to poor mental health well into adulthood.[31] These same risk factors affect adversely a child or youth's mental health. The negative outcomes for LGBTQ homeless youth are even more prevalent.

29 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2016). Child maltreatment 2014

30 Carrie Merscham , J.M Van Leeuwen,, Megan McGuire,, Mental Health and Substance Abuse Indicators Among Homeless Youth in Denver Colorado, 2009 (pg. 3).

31U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2016). Child maltreatment 2014

Recent studies indicate that, in general, the rates for major psychiatric disorders, including depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use disorders are higher among homeless youth compared to housed peers.[32] In addition substance use rates are similarly elevated in the homeless youth population, ranging from 28-81%.[33]

Many homeless youth have experienced significant trauma before and after becoming homeless. All youth have strengths, but youth experiencing homelessness often lack positive opportunities and supports to apply them.

Lessons Learned/Recommendations

Thankfully, many communities are setting out to count their homeless populations. However, most are focused on implementing HUD's PIT counts as their primary method for identifying the homeless youth population that needs help. We hope that the following "lessons learned" will help you think more broadly on how to expand your counts to include a broader homeless youth and young adult population.

Key Lessons Learned from the Homeless Student Survey:

- *It is important to have a valid, research-based survey.* Bill Wilson Center identified *YouthCatalytics's* "Unstably Housed Student Survey" as the survey to be used in surveying high school and community college students in Santa Clara County. The survey was brief, less than a page in size, and specific to the issue of homelessness. It also gave the student a sense of anonymity by having the choice to indicate "knowing a homeless student", rather than identifying themselves as the homeless student.
- *Begin the process of connecting to educational sites at least two semesters before the intended survey start date. Plan your start date within the first three*

32 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Current statistics on the prevalence and characteristics of people experiencing homelessness in the United States. http://homeless.samhsa.gov/ResourceFiles/hrc_factsheet.pdf. Updated July 2011. Accessed June 1, 2015.
33 Merscham C, Van Leeuwen JM, McGuire M. Mental health and substance abuse indicators among homeless youth in Denver, Colorado. Child Welfare. 2009; 88(2):93-110.

months of the schools' calendar year. One of the biggest challenges was getting school administration on board with the survey. This was due in part to the number of activities occurring at the schools, as well as other survey projects being done by the school or other entities. Multiple contacts via telephone and in-person with the Principal/President of the educational site were needed – including a well-planned presentation of the reason for the survey, its importance to the school as well as the community, that doing the survey would be at no cost to the school, and how services could be provided to students experiencing being unhoused.

- *Stress that student confidentiality will be maintained.* We recommended a letter/memo be sent to parents indicating the purpose of the survey, that anonymity will be respected, and that our aim is to determine the needs of students and their families. Our team felt that some families were fearful of having their living situation discovered which might have dire consequences.
- *Key to the success of the survey process is training the teachers who will implement the survey with their students.* Request to meet with the instructors who will be implementing the survey in their classrooms. The teachers need to fully embrace the fact that they do have unhoused students and that the survey will provide significant information in developing services not only for those students, but the community of homeless at large.
- *Set a date for the implementation of the survey (either one day or a series of days during one week), and set a survey pick-up date.* We had several schools postpone the date for the survey, which then led to the survey being postponed for a full semester, and one being postponed until the next school year. It is important to pick the date/time/classroom with the instructors and prompt them as the date gets closer. By the time the school was ready to do the surveys, a positive working relationship between our staff and their designated lead for this project was established making the prompts less intrusive or annoying.
- *Plan on footing the bill for the cost of the paper surveys and the teacher's script.* One of the motivating factors for the schools to participate is that all the surveys

(thousands of them) were provided to the schools. The schools incurred no cost for this project.

- *Compile the data right away and get a report back to the school as soon as possible.* Out of sight, out of mind…..also refers to the issue of student homelessness. Get your report completed and send a copy to the school administration as soon as you can. Use the report to review the issue of students being unhoused, whether couch surfing or on the streets. Work with your schools to determine what the next steps are, and how they and your agency can assist.

Key Lessons Learned From the PIT Youth Count

- *It is highly recommended that a major homeless youth agency take the lead to organize the PIT Youth Count working in conjunction with the County's CoC PIT research/evaluation agency.* Bill Wilson Center was the lead agency for the targeted youth and young adult count in San Jose. Because of our extensive work with homeless youth and young adults in the county, and because we had highly experienced street outreach workers, we were able to reach far more homeless youth and young adults than in previous years. In addition we had a "Youth Count Coordinator" (agency staff) identified to orchestrate the youth count, provide oversight for the youth leads and staff, as well as organize the process for an accurate, wide-reach, homeless youth count.
- *Definitely recruit street youth to partner with staff, as street youth have extensive knowledge of homeless youth "hot spots".* Youth and young adults who had experienced homelessness or were currently homeless were an indispensable resource for the Youth Count. They assisted in identifying known locations for unsheltered youth in advance of the count, and also participated as Youth Leads during the count. They were also helpful in gaining access to homeless encampments otherwise unknown to the public.
- *It is recommended that agency staff, rather than community volunteers, partner with the youth leads for the Youth Count.* Although having volunteers has its benefits, we used Drop-In Center and street outreach staff to partner with youth

leads. Youth leads provided more in depth information about homeless youth whereabouts knowing that program staff would not violate their trust and disclose information to authorities.

- *It is important to use monetary incentives for youth leads and a practical gift for survey respondents.* Besides acknowledging their contribution to the count by giving a monetary incentive, many of the youth actually needed the money.
- *It is recommended that the agency provide several extensive trainings to the youth leads and surveyors within two weeks of the actual count.* We started our trainings a month ahead of time and unfortunately lost several of our youth leads due to their transient nature. Team building was a priority, motivating the teams to gear up for the count, and using that time to review the procedures and location of the "hot spots" for the youth count.
- *A county map was used for the youth leads and street outreach staff to map out the "hot spots" throughout the county.* Once the locations were identified, teams were assigned to the "hot spots", and transportation issues ironed out. Having the "youth voice" was absolutely necessary in this process due to their knowledge of young hang-outs and encampments.
- *It is important to inform and educate other homeless providers/agencies throughout the county of the targeted Youth Count.* We were able to gather more information about locations of homeless youth and young adults in the most southern and northern parts of our county due to contacting homeless providers in those areas.
- *Key to the success of the youth count was our deployment strategy.* The time for deployment was based on information from our youth leads. We had teams start at the outer most northern and southern parts of the county and work their way in toward the Drop-In Center, located in downtown San Jose. We also had a team staying at the Drop-in Center and teams deployed from the DIC. Routes were pre-determined before the day of the count.
- *It is recommended that the youth survey component be completed either during the actual youth count, or soon afterwards.* Following the youth count, youth leads were trained on how to do the surveys with homeless youth and young

adults; however, due to also completing the USC surveys at the same time, this process took much more time than anticipated and the homeless youth were saturated with doing surveys. In retrospect, we needed to have an identified Drop-In Center staff monitor the youth count surveying process more closely, with the surveying completed either during the count or within the days following the count.

- *Always find time to celebrate such an important accomplishment!* Not only does this give recognition to the youth leads and the staff for their hard work, it also demonstrates the community's efforts to end homelessness.

Key Lessons Learned From the USC Research Survey

- *Ideally, if the USC research team could have stayed longer in San Jose and conducted the 200+ surveys themselves, we believe the surveys would have been completed more timely and with more fidelity.* In order to administer the surveys, staff were required to be enrolled in a university and needed to complete necessary documentation for being a surveyor. At the time of the project, we had only two staff at the DIC who could administer the surveys to the youth in addition to managing their full time responsibilities.

Conclusion

Determining the number of youth and young adults who are homeless is complicated by the lack of a standardized methodology for counting the population and inconsistent definitions of what it means to be homeless. The federal government does not have a universally accepted definition of "homeless" for children, youth, and families. This inability to set the parameters of classifying those who are "officially homeless" creates a sense of false security that there is a decline in homeless children, youth and families when other data sources show the contrasting results.

Santa Clara County's 2017 Point-in-Time Homeless Census and Survey put the number of homeless children and youth, at 2,530 individuals. This official count, required by HUD, relies on a visual count of the homeless during two days in January

(one day for the Youth Count). But according to a California Department of Education report published by kidsdata.org, there were slightly more than 5,200 homeless students attending school in Santa Clara County last year. This is an unduplicated number of children and youth identified by public schools under the federal education definition of homelessness. The education number far exceeds the Point-in-Time count, which HUD chooses to use as its headcount.

According to Sparky Harlan, the truest definition of homelessness rests with the people experiencing it. A family knows when they are homeless. They might be living in a homeless encampment, or in their car, or at a weekly motel, or in the garages of friends. These survival strategies are not meant to be long-term, nor do they mean the family is adequately housed. Parents often go to every length they can to keep a roof over their children's heads. Just because they are temporarily successful with motels or "couch-surfing" does not mean they are not homeless; saying otherwise perpetuates a culture of promoting poverty among our nation's ignored children.

At Bill Wilson Center, we know first-hand that young people experiencing homelessness are survivors, and for many, their survival strategies push them out of HUD's definition of "homeless," even when their lives and well-being are at stake. These troubling discrepancies in the counts of homeless families and youth can cause a misdirection or reduction of resources available for combatting homelessness. When lives are at stake, confusion surrounding a definition should not and cannot be accepted.

In researching the issue of homeless prevention for youth, and ultimately breaking the generational cycle of homelessness in families, the Australian government's "Reconnect Operational Guidelines 2017-2018" (a best practice approach to ending homelessness) provides supporting evidence to Bill Wilson Center's framework to ending youth and family homelessness. In addition, the guidelines

considers a person homeless if he or she has inadequate access to safe and secure accommodations.[34] This includes individuals who are "couch-surfing".

By measuring all aspects of homelessness, we are better able to identify the larger needs of the homeless youth/young adult community in Santa Clara County. These young individuals are an elusive group that mostly "couch surfs" or sleeps hidden away in cars or other private places. Some are employed, some are in school – what they have in common is no place to call home - no sense of security, no privacy, and no control of their living space. People may not see them on the street because many spend their evenings "couch surfing", drifting from friends and family members' housing and spending however many nights they can, wherever they can.

Couch surfing might sound like a fun sleepover for youth; however, the reality is that youth and young adults surf from one friend's couch to another because they don't have a home to go to. They are just one couch away from sleeping on the streets and couch surfing doesn't count as having a home.

Contact Information

It is our hope that this document assists agencies in developing strategies that assist with determining the actual number of homeless youth, young adults and families in your cities and counties. Data collection that accompanies counts can provide a clearer picture of the characteristics and subgroups of homeless youth and young adults to better tailor services to their distinct needs.

For more information on Bill Wilson Center's count process, contact Lorraine Flores, Senior Director of Program Development and Impact at lflores@billwilsoncenter.org.

34 Chris Chamberlain and David Mackenzie, Australian Bureau of Statistics Census Analytic Program: Counting the Homeless 2006, (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

Resources

- "Conducting a Youth Count: A Toolkit." *Voices of Youth Count*. http://voicesofyouthcount.org/resource/conducting-a-youth-count-a-toolkit/

- "Ending Youth Homelessness". United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. https://www.usich.gov/goals/youth

- "Ending Family Homelessness". United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. https://www.usich.gov/goals/families

- Government, Alberta. "Supporting Healthy and Successful Transitions to Adulthood: A Plan to Prevent and Reduce Youth Homelessness*."* http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/documents/plan-to-prevent-and-reduce-youth-homelessness.pdf

- "Hidden in Plain Sight." *America's Promise.* http://www.americaspromise.org/report/hidden-plain-sight

- "Home-National Network for Youth – NN4Y." National Network for Youth – NN4Y. https://www.nn4youth.org/

- "Impact of Homelessness on Children and Youth." Homelessness Comes to School, pp. 75–150., https://www.nn4youth.org/wp-content/uploads/IuuseBrief_Pregnancy-and-Parenting-2007_2010ish.pdf. Accessed 19 Aug. 2017

- "Parents & Guardians - National Runaway Safeline | National Runaway Safeline." https://www.1800runaway.org/parents-guardians/

- Petering, Robin. "Homeless Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey."

- Government, Australian Families and Communities. "Reconnect Operational Guidelines 30 June 2017 to 1 July 2018." https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06_2017/reconnect_operational_guidelines_2017-2018.pdf

- "Santa Clara County Homeless Census and Survey." *Santa Clara County Homeless Census and Survey- Supportive Housing- County of Santa Clara*, https://www.sccgov.org/sites/oah/coc/census/Pages/home.aspx

- "Unaccompanied Youth." *SchoolHouse Connection*. https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/unaccompanied-youth/

- "Youth County Toolkit." *True Colors Fund*, https://truecolorsfund.org/portfolio/tools/

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