



Hollywood Homeless Youth Point-in-Time Estimate Project: An Innovative Method for Enumerating Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

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ABSTRACT

Homeless youth are greatly undercounted in the United States. Census methods for homeless adults are inappropriate for homeless youth; thus, nationally, organizations are determining new methods for counting homeless youth. In collaboration with the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership, we utilized an agency-based approach to count and survey all homeless youth entering their facilities and encountered on their outreach activities. Between October 19 and October 25, 2012, 460 unique homeless youth were counted and surveyed in Hollywood. Of these, 222 experienced literal homelessness on the night of Thursday, October 18, 2012, and 381 experienced literal homelessness within the previous year. Literal homelessness refers to youth who are either living in emergency or transitional housing or living on the streets or in parks, abandoned buildings, cars, subway tunnels, or other places not meant for human habitation. Of the surveyed youth who experienced literal homelessness in the last year, 65% were male, their average age was 21 years, their average age of first literal homelessness experience was

17 years, and 43% were from Los Angeles. Our week-long, agency-based approach was successful in enumerating homeless youth in Hollywood.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) issued the “National Research Agenda: Priorities for Advancing Our Understanding of Homelessness,” which called for improved methods for producing a reliable national estimate of the prevalence of unaccompanied homeless youth and their sociodemographic characteristics (USICH, 2012). In particular, USICH is interested in creating better point-in-time methodologies to determine the one-day prevalence of unaccompanied homeless youth in the United States. To meet this crucial need, the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership (HHYP) initiated this project in conjunction with researchers from the University of Southern California (USC) School of Social Work to pilot a new week-long agency-based method for enumerating unaccompanied homeless youth.

HOLLYWOOD HOMELESS YOUTH POINT-IN-TIME ESTIMATE (HHYPIT) METHODS

Agency and Outreach Counts:

To obtain a point-in-time estimate of unaccompanied homeless youth (ages 13-25 years) in Hollywood we applied a two-pronged recruitment strategy. (1) A single recruiter was positioned at each participating agency: Covenant House California, Children's Hospital Los Angeles/ The Saban Free Clinic's High Risk Youth Clinic, Los Angeles Youth Network, My Friend's Place, The Salvation Army's The Way In Youth Services, and the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center's Youth Center on Highland. (2) Recruiters were also assigned to street outreach teams for Covenant House California, Los Angeles Youth Network, and the Youth Center on Highland to capture non-service-seeking homeless youth. Recruitment occurred between Friday, October 19 and Thursday, October 25, 2012. This week was chosen to be representative of average agency use, as opposed to the beginning or end of the month when agencies tend to report lower or higher numbers of youth, respectively. To determine the one-day prevalence of homelessness, all participants were asked where they stayed on the night of Thursday, October 18th. We chose to assess one-day prevalence on a weeknight, as weekend places of stay may be less reflective of standard youth homelessness experiences.

Eligibility Criteria and Avoiding Duplication:

Each agency was assigned a single individual to conduct recruitment for the one-week period. Each youth accessing services during the agencies' hours of operation or seen during street outreach with a particular agency was eligible to participate. Each participant provided the first three letters of his/her first name, the first three letters of his/ her last name, and his/her date of birth. These three components were combined to create the participant's unique identification code; repeated codes were excluded from the unique number of youth reported.

Consent, Surveys, and Incentives:

Recruiters supervised volunteer interviewers who administered a verbal informed assent/consent and the brief paper-and-pencil survey in a semi-private agency space or away from other persons. The consent and survey administration took between five to ten minutes to complete. Participants received two bus tokens for completing the survey. If a participant previously completed the survey at a different location or on outreach, the recruiter asked for the participant's unique identification information and where he/she previously completed the survey. Repeat participants were given one bus token.



Training:

All interviewers and recruiters were trained by Dr. Rice, Dr. Rhoades, and Ms. Winetrobe. Recruiters were trained on appropriate emergency protocols and procedures and how to oversee the interviewers. Recruiters collaborated with their assigned agency's staff for any in-field concerns. All recruiters and volunteers completed an online human research and ethics training and an in-person training that included an overview of homeless youths' behaviors and experiences, and detailed explanations of how to administer the informed assent/consent and questionnaire. We had a total of 7 recruiters and 34 volunteer interviewers. Volunteer interviewers were primarily USC School of Social Work graduate students. The study was approved by USC's Institutional Review Board.

34 volunteer interviewers
7 recruiters
7 days
6 homeless youth agencies



FINDINGS

Between October 19 and October 25, 2012, 460 unique youth were identified. Of these, 39 youth were under the age of 18, and 89 youth were seen at more than one agency. Seventy-nine youth refused to complete the initial survey and 13 refused to complete a repeat survey; however, youth may have been subsequently counted at another agency. Four youth completed only repeat surveys, and seven respondents were excluded after data collection because their reported ages were older than 25. Los Angeles Youth Network youth who were involved with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) could not participate in the survey, as research with this population requires court approval, which can take several months. Due to the time constraints of this point-in-time estimate, we were unable to complete this process. For these youth, de-identified basic information (i.e., age, race, gender, sexual orientation, and place of stay on October 18th) was provided by the agency. Together, My Friend's Place and the Youth Center on Highland saw almost two-thirds of the sample.

All youth were asked where they slept on the night of Thursday, October 18, 2012; a detailed breakdown of places of stay is provided in **Table I**. Nearly 30% reported spending the night outside (e.g., on the street, beach, park), in an abandoned building, in a vehicle (e.g., car, bus), in a public place, in a stranger's home, in a subway or public place underground, or not going to sleep; 23% reported staying in an emergency shelter.

Table I. Hollywood Homeless Youth Point-in-Time Estimate (HHYPIT), October 2012

Number of unique youth	460
Number of unique youth under the age of 18	39
<i>Agency site of survey</i>	% (N)
Covenant House California	15.9 (73)
Covenant House California outreach	5.4 (25)
High Risk Youth Clinic	0.9 (4)
Los Angeles Youth Network	3.3 (15)
Los Angeles Youth Network outreach	3.5 (16)
Los Angeles Youth Network DCFS youth	5.0 (23)
My Friend's Place	34.4 (158)
The Way In Youth Services	1.5 (7)
Youth Center on Highland	26.1 (120)
Youth Center on Highland outreach	4.1 (19)
<i>Where slept on Thursday, October 18, 2012 (N=454¹)</i>	
Street ²	29.3 (133)
Couch surfing/doubling-up ³	8.8 (40)
Temporarily or stably-housed ⁴	20.0 (91)
Shelter (emergency)	22.9 (104)
Transitional living program/sober living facility	11.7 (53)
Motel/hotel	5.0 (23)
Jail/hospital	2.0 (9)
Can't remember	0.2 (1)

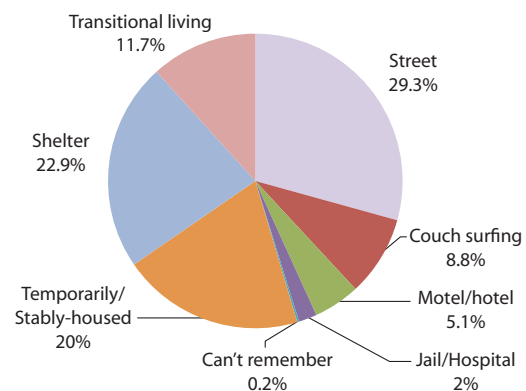
¹ Six youth could not be categorized due to missing information.

² Includes: outside (street, park, beach, etc.), abandoned building/squat, car or bus, didn't sleep, public place, stranger's home, and subway/public place underground.

³ Includes: staying with family, foster family, friend, boyfriend/girlfriend, or sex partner for one week or less.

⁴ Includes: staying with family, foster family, friend, boyfriend/girlfriend, or sex partner for more than one week, or staying in your own place or group home.

Where Youth Slept on October 18, 2012



On the night of October 18th, the prevalence of literal homelessness was 48% of the total sample, or 222 youth (see **Table 2** for details on the categories of stay composing literal homelessness [Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998]). In the 30 days prior to the survey, 317 youth experienced literal homelessness, while 381 experienced literal homelessness in the previous year. Within each time period, staying outside or in an emergency shelter were the most prevalent forms of literal homelessness.



Table 2. Literal Homelessness Experiences in Past Year, HHYPIT, October 2012

	On October 18, 2012	Past 30 Days	Past 12 Months
Total number experiencing literal homelessness	222	317	381
<i>By place of stay¹</i>	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)
Shelter	46.4 (103)	49.8 (158)	64.0 (244)
Public place	3.2 (7)	29.9 (95)	47.0 (179)
Abandoned building, squat	4.1 (9)	29.7 (94)	41.5 (158)
Street, park, beach, outside	45.5 (101)	59.0 (187)	68.0 (259)
Subway, place underground	0.5 (1)	11.0 (35)	19.7 (75)
Stranger's home	0.5 (1)	23.7 (75)	37.3 (142)

¹ Place of stay categories for past 30 days and past 12 months are not mutually exclusive; respondents may have experienced multiple locations of literal homelessness within these time periods.

Table 3 presents sociodemographic characteristics of the 381 youth who reported literal homelessness in the past year. Thirty-six percent of these youth identified as Black/African American, 22% as mixed race, 20% as white, and 16% as Hispanic/Latino; more than one-third (37%) reported non-heterosexual sexual orientation; and 43% of these youth who experienced past-year literal homelessness were originally from Los Angeles. Youth who experienced past-year literal homelessness had an average age of nearly 21 years and first experienced literal homelessness at an average age of 17 years. Nearly 40% of these youth had not received a high school diploma or GED, 44% reported a history of foster care involvement, 36% were ever in the juvenile justice system, and 50% had ever been in jail/prison. Thirty-four percent had a lifetime history of pregnancy (i.e., being pregnant or having impregnated someone); 20% ever had a child, 7% currently had a child(ren) staying with them, and 5% ever had a child(ren) removed from their care.



Table 3. Demographic and Behavioral Characteristics of Youth Experiencing Past Year Literal Homelessness, HHYPIT, October 2012 (N=381)

	% (N)/Mean (S.D.)	Min.	Max.
<i>Race</i>			
Black/African American	35.9 (133)		
White	20.2 (75)		
Hispanic/Latino	16.4 (61)		
Mixed	21.8 (81)		
Native American/Alaska Native	3.5 (13)		
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1.1 (4)		
Asian	0.8 (3)		
Other	0.3 (1)		
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	64.6 (245)		
Female	30.9 (117)		
Transgender Male-to-Female	4.2 (16)		
Transgender Female-to-Male	0.3 (1)		
Age	20.8 (2.4)	13	25
Age first experienced literal homelessness	17.2 (3.2)	1	24
Lifetime duration of literal homelessness (in years)	2.4 (2.7)	0	23
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>			
Gay/Lesbian	15.0 (57)		
Bisexual	19.3 (73)		
Heterosexual/Straight	63.1 (239)		
Queer	0.3 (1)		
Questioning/Unsure	0.8 (3)		
Other	1.6 (6)		
<i>School and Work</i>			
Less than a high school education/no GED	38.5 (145)		
Currently in school	26.1 (98)		
Currently have a job	20.6 (77)		
<i>Place of Origin</i>			
Los Angeles	43.1 (162)		
Southern California (not L.A.)	12.2 (46)		
California (not Southern CA)	7.5 (28)		
Outside California	31.9 (120)		
Outside U.S.	5.3 (20)		
<i>Lifetime Experiences</i>			
Ever in foster care	44.0 (167)		
Ever in the juvenile justice system	36.3 (138)		
Ever in jail/prison	49.5 (188)		
Veteran of U.S. military	2.4 (9)		
Ever pregnant/impregnated someone	33.7 (126)		
Number of pregnancies (among those with pregnancy history)	2.4 (2.7)		
Ever had a child (among all)	20.5 (78)		
Number of children (among those who have had a child)	1.5 (0.9)	1	6
Currently have child(ren) staying with you (among all)	7.1 (27)		
Had child removed by CPS/DCFS (among all)	5.3 (20)		

Note: There are 0-10 missing responses for each variable.

“LESSONS LEARNED” AND FEASIBILITY ISSUES

Overall, the HHYPIT was a success and established the feasibility of this week-long, agency-based method for enumerating homeless youth who are accessing care (or can be reached through street-outreach teams from homeless youth-serving agencies). There are several specific issues to highlight:

1. Utilizing a unique code consisting of the first three letters of the participant’s first name, the first three letters of his/her last name, and his/her date of birth, was a successful method of identifying duplicated participants.
2. The “semi-anonymous” code also eliminated the need for signed informed consent, as there was no method for connecting data to specific individuals.
3. Our incentive of two bus tokens for an initial survey and one bus token for a repeat survey was acceptable to these youth.
4. Most interviews were accomplished in five to ten minutes, including time for informed assent/consent.
5. Youth had very little difficulty recalling where they spent the night on October 18th, even on the last day of data collection (one week later). Utilizing a calendar assisted in participant recall.
6. While a small number of new youth were contacted on the last day of data collection, recruiters found that the population seemed to be largely saturated by this time, suggesting longer periods of counting are not needed.
7. Drop-in agencies are a critical part of the count process, as two-thirds of the participants were contacted at drop-in centers, not shelters or street sites.
8. The agency-based street outreach teams were effectively able to leverage their knowledge of the population to contact youth.
9. This method allows for “couch surfing” or “doubling-up” to be measured.
10. This method serves a dual role by providing a point-in-time estimate as well as a census of youth connected to the service-sector.

MOVING FORWARD

We believe that this week-long, agency-based method for conducting a point-in-time estimate of unaccompanied homeless youth would likely be most effective if combined with more traditional methods of surveying emergency shelter providers and systematic street counts of homeless individuals. As we envision using these techniques in the future, we would offer the following suggestions for improving upon our current method:

1. We recommend including youth in the street outreach efforts. Agency staff who know their populations well can help find many youth on the streets, but youth themselves are the best informed as to where youth are currently spending time.
2. We suggest using this agency-based method in conjunction with shelter counts and systematic street counts. This method is particularly useful in identifying those youth who are seeking services, many of whom are not caught by these other methods. This method unto itself, however, may not be sufficient for a comprehensive count, especially in locations where fewer agencies serve youth.
3. We realize that a large organizational effort is needed to coordinate a single week of counting across many neighborhoods and dozens of organizations. Such coordination is not simple, but is critical for enumerating this population.



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Los Angeles Youth Network
My Friend’s Place
The Saban Free Clinic
The Way In Youth Services

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