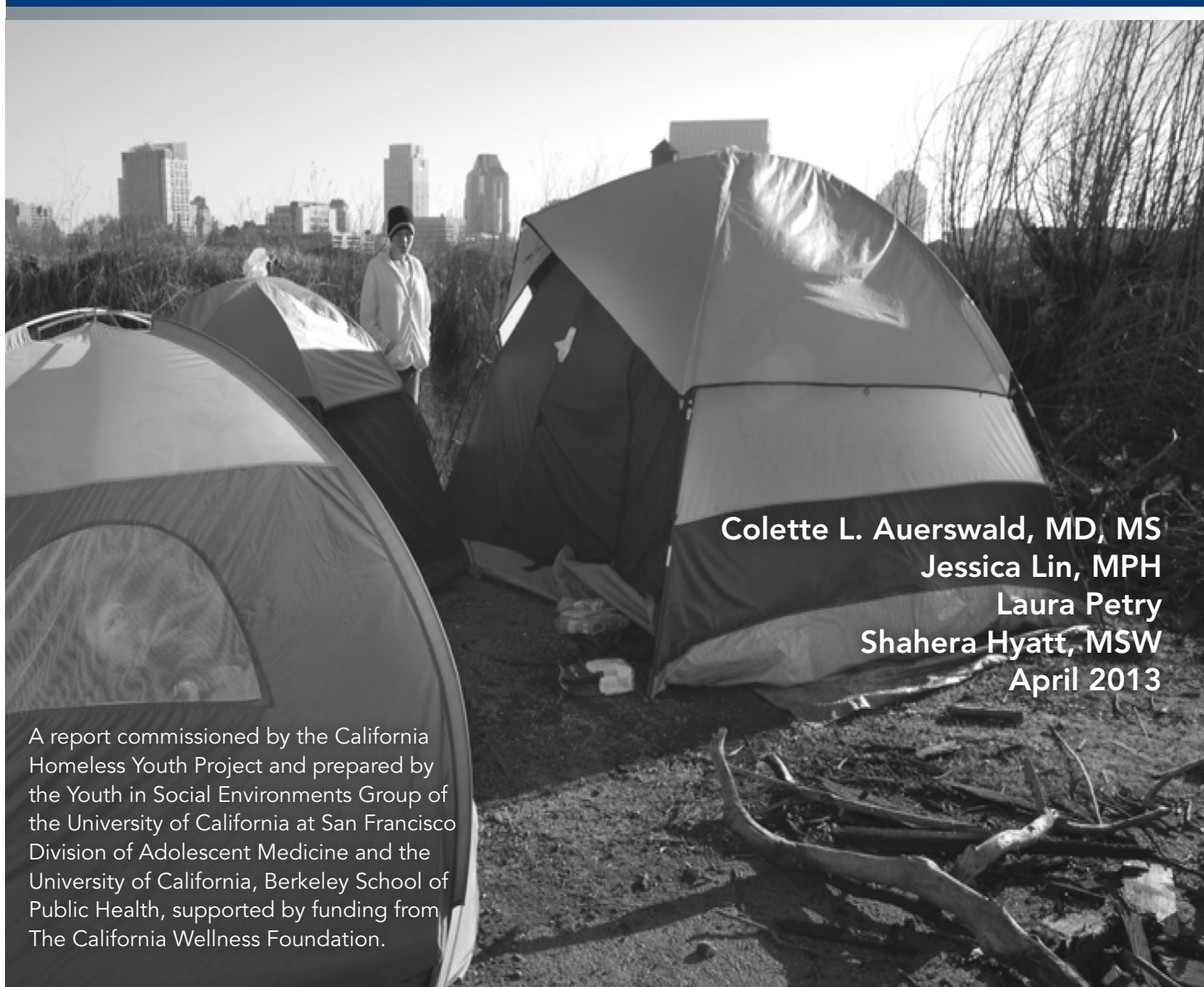




Executive Summary



Hidden in Plain Sight: An Assessment of Youth Inclusion in Point-in-Time Counts of California's Unsheltered Homeless Population



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Executive Summary

Homeless youth are a hidden population that has historically been undercounted in local, state, and federal efforts to enumerate the homeless population. In recent years, researchers and advocates have emphasized the importance of considering the needs of homeless youth as a distinct sub-population of the homeless population overall. A clear recognition has emerged that improvements to the well-being of homeless youth in the US must be informed by accurate data regarding the prevalence and composition of the homeless youth population (U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2012a).

“We can’t afford to have youth missing from the only national homeless count we have.” Matthew Doherty, United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, comments at the National Alliance to End Homelessness conference, February 21, 2013.

In 2013, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which mandates communities receiving federal funds for homelessness programming to conduct a biennial Point-in-Time (PIT) count of their unsheltered homeless populations, required for the first time that communities report the number of unsheltered, unaccompanied minors and 18 to 24-year-old youth (known as transition age youth, or TAY). Prior to this, CoCs had been required to report the numbers of unaccompanied minors but had not been required to record or report numbers of TAY separately from their adult homeless population. Communities have had a range of responses to this new directive, from changing little about their practices to establishing separate youth-specific count initiatives.

Purpose and Scope of the Needs Assessment

This report provides a snapshot-in-time during a critical juncture in the evolution of youth Point-in-Time counts. In 2013, the California Homeless Youth Project and the Youth in Social Environments Group of the University of California at San Francisco Division of Adolescent Medicine and the UC, Berkeley School of Public Health conducted a statewide assessment of youth inclusion in the federally mandated PIT count of unsheltered homeless individuals in California. We spoke with Continuums of Care (CoCs) and other stakeholders immediately prior to and following the first PIT count in which youth inclusion has been a specific aim and a separate TAY count was required.

Interviews were conducted with stakeholders from 31 of California’s 43 Continuums of Care charged with overseeing their community’s PIT count, as well as individuals from five non-profit or university research groups involved as consultants on California counts. We reviewed all published 2011 and 2012 reports from CoCs, including 36 total reports. Seven of these reports included information from CoCs we were not able to interview directly, thus we report here on the experience of 38 of the 43 total CoCs. Supplementary data was garnered from online articles, reports and guidance on the PIT count, as well as the count numbers reported by each CoC to HUD from the years 2005 to 2012. A lexicon of commonly used terms is included as Appendix A in the full report.



Strategies for including youth in PIT counts

Our findings reflect the barriers faced and best practices developed in prior counts, the innovations being made at present to meet HUD reporting requirements, and the needs of a group of CoCs who are largely eager but often struggling to accurately assess their youth homeless populations. CoCs reported a wide range of resources available and methods employed for including youth in their unsheltered PIT count. Methods fell along a continuum, from minimal changes made to separate youth-specific counts, including:

Minimal changes

- Incorporating HUD’s **new age and household type categories** into the PIT count.

Changes to planning processes

- Including **youth service providers, other stakeholders working with youth, and/or currently or formerly homeless youth** in PIT count planning processes.
- Collaborating with **McKinney-Vento school homeless liaisons** to include data on homeless students as part of or a supplement to the PIT count.
- **Encouraging homeless youth to participate** in the PIT count through promotional materials and community outreach prior to the count.

Changes to count methods

- Incorporating **youth-sensitive and/or youth-specific questions** into PIT count surveys.
- Including **youth-inclusive or youth-specific street enumeration routes, times, or survey sites**.
- Including **youth service providers and homeless youth** as PIT count enumerators/interviewers.
- Including **flexibility in the PIT count protocol** for enumerators to interact with youth during the count and to count in street locations identified by youth on the day of the PIT count.
- Providing **services, food, and incentives** to youth being counted.
- Providing a **stipend** to youth for their time staffing the count.
- **Extrapolating from survey data** to determine the number of TAY and minors in the PIT count.

Youth-specific counts

- Incorporating many or all of the above methods, and:
- Conducting a **dedicated count of youth** at specified locations and times of day during the PIT count

Communities also reported several tactics for making their PIT count overall and youth-specific counting less burdensome for the CoC. These included: engaging volunteers to help with enumeration and PIT count logistics; defraying costs through corporate or private sponsorship; leveraging funds and/or participation from partnering stakeholders, such as government agencies receiving HUD funding; working with university or consultant partners; and using new technologies, including Scantron surveys and GIS maps, to reduce the time required for PIT count planning or data entry and analysis.

Barriers to youth inclusion in PIT counts

California CoCs and key informants identified barriers to counting homeless youth, at multiple levels including:

Youth-specific barriers

- **Difficulty identifying homeless youth** because they are not accessing services or frequenting typical homeless “hot spots”; do not appear homeless to enumerators; are more mobile throughout the day; and are more intermittently homeless.
- **Missing sub-groups of youth**, including couch surfers; hotel- and motel-based homeless youth; campers; youth of color; youth who do not self-identify as homeless; homeless students; and juvenile justice- or child welfare service-involved youth.

CoC and program-related barriers

- **Geographic factors** such as large rural or otherwise unreachable areas (such as mountainous areas, national park land, unincorporated areas, or places without ambient light), limiting enumerators’ ability to canvass some communities.
- **Winter weather conditions** of snow and rain, leading to understaffing and undercounting.
- **Limited integration of youth service providers** in the PIT count planning process. Youth service agencies that are not members of their CoC may have limited input in and ownership over PIT count planning, making their experience and efforts with supporting a PIT count lackluster.

PIT methodological barriers

- **Wariness of statistical methods** like de-duplication, extrapolation and calculated counts sometimes used with youth sub-counts.
- **Concerns about ability to compare results over time** if PIT count methods change to better include youth.
- **Inexperience with the new mandate to count transition age youth.** Some time may be needed for CoCs to learn how to implement such a count in their communities.

Structural barriers

- **Lack of funding** for the PIT count overall and for counting youth in particular.
- **Limited capacity of youth service providers** to participate in the PIT count. Though HUD suggests CoCs work with their RHY programs to effectively count youth, 19 of the 43 California CoCs do not have a RHY grantee in their jurisdiction. In communities that do have youth service programming, providers are often operating with constrained resources and time.
- **Reluctance of some service providers to participate** in a count that they see as an undercount, as it does not include youth who are doubled-up, couch surfing, etc.
- **Concerns regarding the reporting obligations** of PIT count enumerators encountering unaccompanied minors.
- **Conflicting federal definitions of homelessness** and the resulting inability to integrate data or pool data collection resources amongst PIT counts, McKinney-Vento school homeless liaisons, and RHY-funded youth service providers.

Ten take-home lessons for CoCs

1. The PIT count is an opportunity to gather locally relevant data that supports planning and funding needs.
2. The PIT count provides an opportunity to engage individuals in care.
3. Buy-in from the community, from service providers, and from youth is crucial to including youth in the PIT count.
4. There is a range of methods and levels of effort that communities invest in increasing youth inclusion in the PIT count.
5. Street count routes, locations, and times should be strategically planned to align with youths' routines.
6. PIT count surveys should include youth-focused survey items.
7. Technology may be a helpful tool that reduces the burden of data entry.
8. PIT counts can be innovatively funded (for example, through corporate or private sponsorships and other partnerships).
9. Rural communities may benefit from building on existing relationships between formal and informal service providers and homeless individuals for their counts.
10. Other CoCs are a valuable resource when determining what local practices may be most effective in one's community.

Conclusions and recommendations for future inclusion of youth in PIT counts

CoCs reported receiving guidance related to including unaccompanied minors and transition age youth in their PIT counts from a number of resources, including webinars, publications, research consultants, youth service providers, listservs, and community members. However, most communities had requests for further support in conducting future counts. In addition, several areas of unmet need became evident during the assessment process. Areas for future technical assistance include:

- Guidance tailored to community type, particularly for rural communities unable to replicate the count methods utilized in urban areas.
- Guidance on engaging community members to collaborate in the PIT count, including youth, schools, police, and service providers.
- Materials and support for training staff, volunteers, and youth enumerators.
- Sample data collection sheets, surveys, and data entry and analysis tools for use in the PIT count.
- Promotional materials for communicating with homeless populations, volunteers, service providers, schools, and the media about the PIT count.
- Technical assistance on reporting changes to PIT count methods and any related increases in population size numbers to HUD.
- Clarification of legal guidelines regarding counting and surveying minors in the PIT count (See "Best Practice Spotlight: Counting and Surveying Unaccompanied Minors" in the full report for resources related to this issue).
- Guidance on potential funding sources and other resources for PIT counts.

In addition to providing communities with further guidance and materials, several policy changes would improve the count of unaccompanied minors and transition age youth. These include:

- **Funding** the PIT count overall and youth-specific count efforts in particular.
- **Coordination of definitions and data systems** for the homeless on the federal level.
- **Clarification from HUD** regarding the goals of the PIT count on a federal and local level.
- **Creation of a PIT count definition of youth homelessness** that is more workable on the ground.
- **Recognition from HUD** that the current standardized PIT count methods may lead to systematic undercounting in some areas more than others, and of youth more than adults.
- **Assurance from HUD** that any increases in PIT count numbers related to efforts to conduct more youth-inclusive counts will be praised rather than penalized.