



Editorial

Counting All Homeless Youth Today So We May No Longer Need To Tomorrow



Somehow we have come to accept homelessness in the United States, including youth homelessness, as an inevitability of modern urban life. Yet anyone born before 1980 has lived in a world in which youth homelessness at the current scale was unimaginable. In fact, today's adult, youth, and family homelessness crisis is a direct result of structural shocks less than 40 years ago, including the large-scale disinvestment in low-income housing implemented by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) during the Reagan administration [1].

This month's article by Morton et al. calls attention to the vastness of youth homelessness, at a magnitude far exceeding prior estimates [2]. Notably, the article also calls for solutions that will not only scale effective housing and supportive services to address all currently and imminently homeless youth, but also the implementation of new structural interventions to address upstream causes.

The article estimates that 660,000 US households had at least one 13- to 17-year-old who experienced homelessness in the year before the survey. Moreover, it estimates that 3.5 million individual 18- to 25-year-olds experienced homelessness during the same period. Based on the conservative assumption that each of the households surveyed had a single affected minor, this adds up to 4.16 million 13- to 25-year-olds experiencing homelessness in a single year. This number is logarithmically higher than prior estimates, and for good reason, as we shall see.

Morton et al.'s report is the product of the Chapin Hall-based Voices of Youth Count, a public-private partnership that aims to improve national data on youth homelessness. Their work is timely. In 2010, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, the federal body in charge of coordinating homelessness policy, committed to a goal of ending youth homelessness by 2020 in its strategic plan [3]. As rightly stated by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, to reach this goal we must first be able to count and characterize the population and do so reproducibly and over time. However, counting homeless minors and transitional aged youth (TAY) 18–24 years of age has been, to say the least, a vexing problem.

HUD has conducted point-in-time (PIT) counts of the homeless population on a *single night* in January each year since 2005. PIT counts have always included a distinct count of minors (both unaccompanied minors and children in families). In response to the 2020 goal of ending youth homelessness, a separate count of 18- to 24-year-olds was added in 2013.

Although counting TAY as part of the PIT has been an important advancement, the findings have been plagued with challenges, yielding numbers that are widely recognized as vast undercounts. Counts to date have been primarily based on visual assessments of youth in public places, although an increasing number of communities are now counting youth by directly surveying them in street venues. Visual assessments systematically undercount youth who go to great lengths to hide their homelessness, as well as youth who shun venues where homeless youth congregate (particularly true both of youth of color and immigrant youth) [4,5]. Furthermore, the same underfunded county government entities entrusted with counting youth are politically disincentivized from doing so inclusively, as higher numbers suggest ineffective public investments [6]. Unsurprisingly then, the percent of counties in California that reported no homeless minors and fewer than 100 homeless TAY (numbers that defy common sense for any county) has remained stubbornly high [7].

Distinct from HUD's efforts, the Department of Education counts homeless minors in schools, as dictated by the McKinney Vento Act [8]. Unlike the PIT count, these numbers reflect a count over an entire year (as opposed to a single night). The definition of youth homelessness under McKinney Vento is broader than the HUD definition, and includes couch surfing. However, this count does not include out of school youth or young adults, and to date has yielded a vanishingly low count of unaccompanied minors.

Thus, current data do not allow a population-level view of the dimensions of the problem that accounts for the broad range of how adolescents and young adults experience homelessness.

The importance of counting youth who are couch surfing cannot be overstated. The definition that Morton et al. employs describes a form of shelter that is neither safe,

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developmentally appropriate, nor conducive to accomplishing the tasks of adolescence [9]. Furthermore, our joint 50 years' experience in research and practice has demonstrated that couch surfing youth and youth experiencing street-based homelessness are highly overlapping groups, exchanging places depending on the time of the month, the circumstances of the day, or the patience and resources of the hosts [10,11]. Our experience is confirmed by Morton et al.'s findings.

The Voices of Youth Count approach most certainly has its limitations, which are well highlighted by the authors. The greatest limitations stem from the reporting *by adults* of the homelessness status of minors and TAY under their roof. The inclusion error rate was accounted for by a supplemental interview, with a large inclusion error rate for the estimate of couch surfing-only youth, and a smaller inclusion error rate for youth who were explicitly homeless. However, this correction does not account for the inevitable exclusion error in this approach. A failure to report minor and TAY homelessness could result from social desirability or fear of being reported to the authorities.

There are a number of potential ways in which this approach might be improved. The first would be to interview minors directly, as was done for TAY respondents. The consent issues in a random digit dial survey for such a process are daunting. Nevertheless, a population-level estimate of minors is essential. Another improvement would be to include more data characterizing the youth population (acknowledging this would lengthen the survey, thereby decreasing feasibility). In particular, overlap with the juvenile and adult justice system would be informative to addressing the intersectionality of the experience of these youth. Finally, guidelines for samples that could be constructed to represent data at the state or local level would be worthwhile, allowing for more regional or local planning.

We should not simply throw up our hands in despair, however. Morton et al.'s work (complemented by existing research) provides important guidelines for moving forward. At a societal level, we must dispel any perception that youth homelessness is solely an urban issue; it is, rather, a national one. Any true solution must incorporate the needs of rural youth, whose rates of homelessness are equivalent [7,12]. We must also explore ways to develop an early warning system for street homelessness for minors and youth, engaging schools, health providers, and other mandated reporters, for example. Third, we must address the stigma, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia that are key drivers for youth homelessness. Fourth, Morton et al.'s findings echo the fact that education continues to be a critical vaccine against future homelessness, as well as against negative consequences once youth are on the street [13]. Fifth, inclusiveness, particularly among youth of color and sexual or gender minority youth, requires systematically incorporating youth voices into program design. Finally, we must intentionally partner with youths' communities of origin. Researchers in particular, but providers and policy makers as well, are often guilty of visualizing youth experiencing homelessness in a vacuum, instead of in the context of their families, extended families, and communities, as we would for housed youth.

Ending youth homelessness once and for all is long overdue. Being able to count and characterize the population nationally

and longitudinally may continue to be elusive. However, in a world of imperfect counts, the work of Morton and his colleagues is a welcome addition.

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