Preble Street

Conducting an Accurate Count of Rural Homeless Youth

Implications for Policy and Practice and Lessons Learned

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INTRODUCTION

Lack of consistency in estimates of the number of homeless youth in America has led to many calls for better counts, efforts that account for the uniqueness of youth populations and the challenges entailed in developing successful strategies to address this national problem.

Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness was released by the Obama administration in June 2010 and sets a goal for counting homeless populations including youth and acknowledges that youth needs are distinct from those of adults. In the 2012 Amendment to the plan, the first key strategy was to "Obtain more comprehensive information on the scope of youth homelessness with improvements on counting methods, coordination, and dissemination of information, and new research that expands understanding of the problem" (USICH, 2012, amendment). In 2013, The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) which directs policy, published the *Framework to End Youth Homelessness,* in which two complimentary strategies for achieving goals were "to get better data on the number and characteristics of youth experiencing homelessness" and "to strengthen and coordinate the capacity of federal, state, and local systems to act effectively and efficiently toward ending youth homelessness."

The process of counting youth who are homeless or unstably housed has been most often grounded in the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) point-in-time methodology that is a requirement of local Continuums of Care that receive HUD support. This methodology of counting homeless individuals at shelters and where they may be found on the street is adequate for adults particularly in urban areas; however, meaningful counts of youth typically are not captured through this process. Youth tend to be mobile and transient, looking to friends for shelter or staying in groups, with many not wanting to be found even if literally without a place to stay. Most are not found in shelters, an issue exacerbated in a rural state in which there are few shelters which can be tens or even hundreds of miles from a youth's home community.

The limited definition provided by HUD on what constitutes being homeless does not comport to the reality of many runaway and homeless youth. Youth tend to double up with friends or other family while the HUD definition only counts those who are in shelters or on the street. Evidence from programs supports the fact that youth transition to the HUD definition of homelessness on a different path than their adult counterparts. In the last few years there has been an effort to create methodologies that will provide relevant and accurate counts of just what youth homelessness looks like.

To further compound the problem, homelessness in rural communities often manifests itself differently then urban centers. Most rural communities do not have homelessness shelters, drop in centers, or places where groups of people who are struggling with housing can meet or access services. Typically, rural homelessness consists of a single individual living in a place not meant for human habitation, perhaps staying with friends or extended family, or even moving from place to place. They often rely on third sector supports such as churches to meet their basic needs. Many individuals in rural communities who are struggling with housing are not included in the federal point-in-time counts.

In a primarily rural state such as Maine, homeless counts occur primarily in communities in which shelters exist. Many areas of the State, including some cities and towns that have identified issues with homelessness, do not participate in the counts. The fact that there are close to 40 adult or family shelters in Maine and only three youth shelters adds to the relative challenge of finding runaway and homeless youth. Youth from rural areas who are homeless must access indigenous community networks for housing, food and support. Friends also provide an extension to the support network by providing a place to stay, food and social support to youth who are unstably housed.

Maine's three youth shelters are located in the state's three largest cities—Portland, Lewiston and Bangor. This creates concerns about the lack of resources in other parts of the state as well as concern about the migration of youth from their home communities to larger cities where they face increased risk. More than one third of all youth seeking shelter come from rural communities across Maine. However, little is known about what triggers migration to the cities, the survival strategies of youth who remain in rural communities and, perhaps most important, whether there are opportunities to increase prevention and intervention in youth's home communities that would lead to family reunification or successful transition to adulthood.

BACKGROUND

The actual number of youth who are homeless in the United States varies widely. In 2009, HUD, using data from HMIS reported an estimate of 22,700 homeless youth. During that same year, the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration, (SAMSHA) estimated the number to be 1.6 million. This wide discrepancy in estimates has been topic of conversation and was even mentioned in USICH, 2010, *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan for Preventing and Ending Homelessness.* While the goal of developing a more accurate count methodology is clear, the processes needed to accomplish this continue to be ambiguous.

For the better part of 20 years, researchers and practitioners have acknowledged the processes and protocols for counting homeless youth are inadequate. Fosburg and Dennis (1999) suggested a different methodology was needed to account for differences in migration patterns and housing for youth. Raleigh-Slavin (2001) suggested that many youth who are unstably housed do not engage in the formal social service systems where typical estimates of homelessness among the adult population typically take place. DuRoff (2004) suggested the highly mobile nature of youth homelessness does not align with point-in-time counting methodologies. Rew (2008) suggested youth who are homeless learn about available resources and support structures, including places to stay, from other youth rather than through social service providers and outreach workers. Pergamit and Ernst (2010) suggested youth who are homeless have higher levels of distrust in social service systems, which impacts an accurate count. More recently, Auerswald, Lin, Petry and Hyatt (2013) found the inclusion of youth in point-in-time counts in California missed many youth who simply avoided the count or were reluctant to participate.

METHODOLOGY

As suggested earlier, the aims of this study were to conduct an accurate count of youth who were unstably housed and to explore daily living and social interactions. A 45-item survey

instrument was created using homeless youth count studies conducted in Los Angeles and New York. Two focus groups with homeless youth were conducted to seek input about the content of the survey and recommendations for best ways to find youth unstably housed outside of shelters. A group of direct service staff including outreach and shelter workers from across the state joined a group of sheltered youth to review and give final input into the survey and the survey questions were then piloted with youth on two different occasions. At several points during this process, project staff consulted with Dr. Martha Burt, a nationally recognized leader on homelessness and counting methodologies, on question placement and specific wording of questions.

A research assistant was employed early in the process to develop media tools and advisories, facilitate connections with local school districts, law enforcement and other organizations which may interface with youth in rural parts of the target areas. The research assistant also assisted in the survey development and recruitment and selection of data collectors. The existing Maine Homeless Youth Provider Group which represents programs from across the state as well as state and local officials reviewed the plans for the youth count and acted as an advisory group through the entire process.

The Counties of York, Cumberland, Oxford, Androscoggin, Franklin, Knox, and Kennebec were selected for inclusion in the study. These counties were selected for three primary reasons: 1.). They represented a mixture of rural and urban communities; 2.). These countries where highly populated with 58% of the State's population residing with these six counties; and 3). Researchers had developed relationships with service providers and shelter staff in these counties, resulting in a local partner organization committing to facilitate the data collection.

Researchers elected to use a modified point-in-time methodology for survey implementation. A date of May 18, 2015 was selected as "the date you where homeless" with data collection occurring from May 18 through May 31. The purpose of using this format was to align the results with point-in-time data collected through the traditional point in time count in Maine in January of each year.

The data collectors were a mixture of social service professionals, students and other volunteers in each of the counties. Several organizations chose to use existing outreach staff to conduct the survey while others elected to hire add new temporary staff to specifically focus on the count. The researchers convened groups of data collectors in each county and conducted training on survey implementation, how to approach youth who were youth who may be unstably housed, and strategies to approaching and coordinating with key informants such as school homeless liaisons, local law enforcement, and local offices of the Office of Child and Family Services (OFCS), Maine's child welfare agency.

To access youth who were unstably housed, we used a snowball sampling technique which relied on the media, including newspaper and radio interviews, local posters, and contacts created by the research assistant as well as connections made through volunteers and the data collectors in each county. School districts in each of the counties served as the focus for the initial start of the data collection and were contacted though e-mail and flyers in advance of the beginning of the count. Data collectors expanded from school and youth referred in schools to other areas as the process unfolded. Outreach workers or case managers who served as data collectors also sought data from

youth on their caseloads. As the data collection progressed, data collectors also met with youth in public places, parks, stores and many other parts of local communities.

To control for duplicate response, a unique identifier, which included the county where the survey was completed, was used. Youth who participated in the survey were given a Dunkin Donuts gift card or, in one county, were given cash. A total of 265 surveys were completed. The surveys were coded and entered into SPSS for analysis. Data was further segmented in the analysis by urban and rural communities. For the purpose of this study, "urban" was identified as Portland and Lewiston, and "rural" was considered all other communities. Urban areas of Portland and Lewiston are the cities where youth shelters and drop in centers exist.

DATA PRESENTATION

The data suggests the number of youth who are homeless or unstably housed is significantly higher than what is reported during the annual January point-in-time count. The most recent PIT Count documented 51 homeless youth under 21 years old statewide, while 263 were discovered in this seven county effort. The results included twice as many youth (105) meeting the HUD definition of homeless with an additional 127 youth who were unstably housed in situations such as couch surfing or temporarily staying with extended relatives. Additionally, 33 youth were living in transitional living programs, institutional settings, or other temporary housing. Data presentation includes the differences between urban and rural youth.

Table 1: Breakdown of urban versus rural youth

Rural/Urban	Average age	Length of time homeless
Urban (Portland, Lewiston)	19.12	464 days
Rural (not Portland or Lewiston)	18.14	343 days

Table 1 suggests urban youth tended to be older and have longer durations of homelessness than rural youth.

Table 2: Gender and sexual orientation of study participants

Rural/Urban	Gender	Sexual orientation
Urban (Portland, Lewiston)	Male=62% Female=34%	Straight=81% Bisexual=1% Gay/Lesbian=9% Transgender=3%
Rural (not Portland or Lewiston)	Male=54% Female=46%	Straight=94% Gay/Lesbian=5%

Table 2 suggests the majority of youth who participated in the study identified themselves as straight males. The number of youth in urban areas who identified their sexual orientation as other than straight was 13%. The data also suggests these youth tended to have longer periods of homelessness than straight youth in urban areas.

Table 3: Demographic information of study participants.

Rural/Urban	Couch surfers	In School
Urban (Portland, Lewiston)	38%	31% **
Rural (not Portland or Lewiston)	89%	42%

Table 3 suggests rural youth tended to be couch surfing and attending school at higher rates than their urban counterparts. **Urban school numbers may be inflated by on-site school programs and services available at shelters and drop-in centers

Table 4: Episodes of homelessness and chief reason for being homeless

Rural/Urban	# Episodes of homelessness	Chief reason for homelessness
Urban (Portland, Lewiston)	2.50	Kicked out
Rural (not Portland or Lewiston)	3.02	Family conflict/rules at home

Table 4 suggests participants reported more episodes of homelessness in rural areas than in urban areas. Variation in length and definition of unique episodes may be needed to better clarify this difference. Additionally, rural youth reported different reasons for being homeless, which appear to be more of their own choices than those of others. Rural youth reported the chief reasons for being homeless as clustering around issues such as disagreements with family, choosing not to live with family, or changes in living situation of the adult family caregiver. The majority of urban youth reported being kicked out, asked to leave, or leaving because of a parent's mental health issues or incarceration of an adult caregiver. Differences between the two suggest rural youth may have greater control over reunifying with family members than their urban counterparts.

Table 5: Barriers and experiences at home of participants

Rural/Urban	Barriers to stable housing	Ever run away from home
Urban (Portland, Lewiston)	Can't afford rent=74% Can't find apartment=42%	Yes=87%
Rural (not Portland or Lewiston)	Can't find apartment=64% Unable to find a job or job training=28%	Yes= 62%

Table 5 suggests both urban and rural youth experience difficulties in affording rent. Youth in urban areas reported running away from home at higher rates than youth from rural communities. As suggested in Table 4, the data seems to suggest that youth from rural areas leave home by choice rather than being kicked or forced out by others.

Table 6: Participants' experiences with running away and involvement with the foster care system

Rural/Urban	How many times you tried to return home after running away	Ever been in the foster care system
Urban (Portland, Lewiston)	1-4 times=78%	72%
Rural (not Portland or Lewiston)	5-10 times=74%	32%

Table 6 suggests of youth who reported running away from home, rural youth reported running away more often than urban youth. As mentioned in Table 5, this seems to confirm the causes of homelessness for youth in rural communities is related to the youth's individual decision not to stay at home and may indicate multiple short episodes with return home.

Table 7: Participants' involvement with other systems.

Rural/Urban	Spent time in Jail	Spent time in MH facility	Spent time in SA facility
Urban (Portland, Lewiston)	Yes=27%	Yes=34%	Yes=21%
Rural (not Portland or Lewiston)	Yes=19%	Yes=11%	Yes=4%

Table 7 suggests that youth from urban areas tended to spend time in jail, a mental health facility or a substance abuse facility at higher rates than their rural counterparts. This may be related to the fact that these types of organizations are located in urban communities as opposed to rural settings, that discharges from these institutions tend to be made to shelters, that youth who spend time on urban streets are more likely to develop issues that result in institutionalization, or that youth with these challenges more frequently migrate to the urban centers.

Table 8: Participants' military service, education.

Rural/Urban	Served in the military	Highest level of education	Currently attending education program?
Urban (Portland, Lewiston)	Yes=4%	Completed 8th grade or below=43%	High School/GED=41%
Rural (not Portland or Lewiston)	Yes=1%	Completed 8th grade or below=88%	Still in high school=62%

Table 8 suggests youth from rural areas were attending high school at higher rates than their urban counterparts.

Table 9: Participants' employment

Rural/Urban	Currently employed	Type of work	Not employed. How you meet basic needs?
Urban (Portland, Lewiston)	No=64%	Food service; cashier	Entitlement; food/soup kitchen

Rural (not Portland or Lewiston)	No=92%	Cashier	Family/friends provide support

Table 9 suggests that the majority of youth who participated in the study were not working, with youth in urban areas more likely to find employment. Of those who were working, most worked in service industries. For those who were not working, basic needs for rural youth were met through family and friends while urban youth reported accessing entitlement programs and local food programs.

Table 10: Participants' pregnancy or children.

Rural/Urban	Pregnancy	# of Children	Children living with you
Urban (Portland, Lewiston)	Yes=9%	1=84%	Yes=84%
Rural (not Portland or Lewiston)	Yes=1%	1=100%	1=100%

Table 10 suggests the majority of youth did not have any children and had not been pregnant or gotten someone pregnant.

Table 11: Participants' level of disability

Rural/Urban	Diagnosed with a disability	Currently accessing services	Opportunities offered to you
Urban (Portland, Lewiston)	Yes=41%	Yes=84%	Housing; job training; employment
Rural (not Portland or Lewiston)	Yes=21%	Yes=41%	Housing; job training

Table 11 suggests youth from urban areas have higher levels of disabilities and were engaged in services at higher rates than their rural counterparts. This is consistent with the higher rates of institutionalization and with the availability of services targeting runaway and homeless youth in urban centers.

Table 12: Participants opinions on feeling safe

Rural/Urban	Currently feel safe	Last warm meal	Rate your level of effort to better your situation
Urban (Portland, Lewiston)	Yes=84%	Today/yesterday=64%	Considerable effort=84%
Rural (not Portland or Lewiston)	Yes=93%	Today/yesterday=93%	Considerable effort=72%

Table 12 suggests rural youth reported higher feelings of safety and also higher rates of accessing warm food than their urban counterparts. Rural youth also reported lower "levels of effort to better their situation" than their urban counterparts

Table 13: Advice you would give to homeless youth in a similar situation (top responses)

Rural/Urban	Advice	Are you on your own?
Urban (Portland, Lewiston)	Stay true to who you are; things will work themselves out; your friends will	Yes=94%
Rural (not Portland or Lewiston)	Homelessness is only temporary if you work hard; ask family and friends for	Yes=81%

DISCUSSION

The data suggests many differences between urban and rural youth who are unstably housed. Youth in rural areas tended to be younger, continuing with school and with less length of time of homelessness, and are less engaged in formal social service systems and institutions. Rural youth run away more often but appear to return home and continue relationships with family and friends through these episodes. Additionally, rural youth reported the chief reasons for being homeless as issues of their choice, e.g. rigid rules at home, while their urban counterparts cited reasons for homelessness were less in their control, e.g. kicked out of their parent's home.

The findings point toward the fact that youth in the rural sites were clearly still more connected with family, friends, local school, and depending on informal supports to survive while youth in the urban centers, largely found at shelters, in drop-in programs or through outreach programs, rely on formal supports and were less likely to return to parents or guardians.

Data suggests that rural youth work hard to stay in their communities and while rural youth report lower effort to better their situation then urban youth, this may be an artifact of the strength of the informal network which supports them.

These differences appear to point to distinct pathways in which some rural youth eventually will migrate to shelters in urban centers for assistance, the cause of which needs further investigation to understand whether this reflects the eventual need for shelter, characteristics of specific youth, or slow disintegration of informal supports in home community.

Further analysis of the data also suggests youth who leave rural communities and come to Lewiston or Portland more quickly are more likely to struggle with issues of mental illness and substance abuse. These factors may have precipitated their move to urban centers, or increased behavioral health issues may be related to coming to new, larger communities and the stress of life on the street or in shelters. The discharge to shelters from institutional care in the behavioral health and criminal justice systems may also contribute to these differences.

SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Youth who identified as LGBTQ

Nationally, LGBTQ youth are estimated to make up between 25% and 40% of runaway and

homeless youth. In this youth count, there was a total of 13% of youth from urban areas (Portland and Lewiston) who identified themselves as LGBTQ youth. From the rural areas, this population constituted 5% of youth. While this appears to be an undercount, it is difficult to gauge the importance of the use of interviewers to gather data compared to counts that emerge over time in programs. However, there were notable differences between the youth:

- LGBTQ youth in Portland and Lewiston reported shorter periods of homelessness. This may be because they move to the cities more quickly and are found in urban shelters. Youth also reported:
  - Lower levels of effort to improve their situation.
  - Running away from home at higher rates than non LGBTQ youth.
  - Attempts to reunify with their family after running away at higher rates.
- For the small number of LGBTQ youth who remained in rural areas, most reported they were couch surfing. Rural LGBTQ youth also reported:
  - Lower rates of school attendance than their non-LGBTQ youth in rural areas.
  - Most reported they were getting their basic needs met through family and friends.

Youth Involved in the Foster Care System

Nearly three quarters of the youth in the urban centers had involvement with the foster care system and nearly one third of the youth in rural areas. While not surprising, based on previous data on runaway and homeless youth, the difference between those counted in urban areas and rural areas are striking.

This likely reflects the number of youth who seek shelter and treatment services where they are most available and the fact that foster care workers refer youth who are discharged or running from placements to shelters. The relationship between the experience in the child welfare system and mental health and substance abuse may explain the impact of trauma and family instability on youth who end up at shelters in Maine. Further exploration of the experience of youth in the child welfare system and with their families as well as more detail about placement history and preparation for independence, is needed.

THE METHODOLOGY: LESSONS LEARNED

The data suggests the current point-in-time method of counting youth who are homeless does not accurately estimate the nature or extent of homelessness among youth.   The number of youth found in the study indicates a true estimate of unstably housed and homeless youth in Maine to be many times greater than previously documented. The data suggests some differences among youth who are homeless in rural and urban areas of Maine and also suggests some opportunities for service delivery, program development, and policy issues as well as further research.

As has been discovered by other researchers, youth in rural areas did not engage in formal social services and the process of finding, counting and assessing their needs can be difficult. Although the Maine Youth Count discovered large numbers of youth who were unstably housed and missing from PIT counts, the challenge of consistently finding youth in rural areas remained. However,

there were clear lessons learned that can inform future attempts at finding youth. The greatest barrier was inconsistent support from local school districts and homeless liaisons, many of whom were overwhelmed with a number of assignments and lack of resources. In smaller rural school districts, the role of the homeless liaison is often one of many roles an administrator or counselor must play. Some school districts expressed concern about the school's reputation or funding, while others actively identified youth that might qualify and started the snowball effect in their community. As with schools, the time and commitment of local law enforcement also varied.

These issues can best be addressed at a state level and with additional time for community education and training. It may also be impactful to include stakeholders in early planning in order to address concerns about the consequences of higher number of youth who are homeless in their communities.

Snowball methodology

While the snowball methodology was successfully implemented in other studies, the rural nature of the counties did not match well with this type of method.
Rather, future studies should rely on a menu of data collection strategies including greater involvement with school guidance and social workers, stronger connection to other rural community supports. This may involve a snowball sampling technique where the data collector ask youth to provide names of other youth, but it may also involve working with staff at the school to identify youth they know who are struggling with housing, doubled up or staying outside of their home.

Using data collectors

The need for additional research assistants and data collectors is an important factor. While the researchers provided thoughtful and thorough training on how to collect data from youth, some of the data collectors were reticent to ask personal questions. We attribute this to the fact that many of the data collectors were service providers who struggled with the difference in conducting an interview to collect data versus completing an intake form with a client.
To alleviate this in the future, we would recommend hiring and training data collectors with specific instructions that the instrument is for research and not for therapy or case management. This may involve avoiding case managers or other service providers as data collectors in general.

Youth in Rural and Urban Counts

Most important is the evidence that youth in rural areas exist in large numbers and that little attention has been paid to their distinct characteristics or the potential for developing prevention and intervention programs in small towns and rural school districts. Evidence suggests that a focus on early prevention and intervention with youth and families may prevent migration to services in urban centers. This migration means leaving family and friends as well as other supports, a decrease in factors that have been demonstrated to be protective as youth reach adulthood. Migration can also mean exposure to increased risk factors such as street culture and increased risk of exploitation and trafficking.

Can local communities develop prevention and intervention options that assist youth to remain among their supports and in school while still ensuring safety from harm?

The fact that youth in urban centers appear on their own seems to increase risk for negative behaviors including drugs and survival sex.

Shelters and outreach must find means of engaging youth who have been homeless for months and who do not appear to have many choices or control over their situations. The rates of instability and trauma that these youth have already experienced and the high rates of mental health and substance abuse issues makes coordination of resources and low barrier programs essential. Programs must look at intervention strategies that include harm reduction, treatment, skills building, housing and development of income which are all essential to meeting their needs. These are costly but necessary interventions.

Policy implications and lessons learned from the study

The results of this study suggest several policy implications that can impact programming, further strengthen data collection, and produce longer-term solutions to addressing youth homelessness. These include:

1. Support for evidence-informed programming with strong evaluation must span Federal, State, and local systems and requires integrated and flexible funding.
2. Increase in harm reduction and low barriers to entry across systems requires adjusting rules and greater focus on understanding behaviors that are the result of trauma, isolation from supports, and often multiple rejections and failures for youth from rural communities.
3. Recognizing the distinct needs of youth and the programs equipped to serve them.
4. A focus on early prevention and intervention with youth and families may prevent migration to services in urban centers that can result in decreased protective factors, increased risk factors, and costlier interventions.
5. Local resources, including schools, law enforcement, faith communities, and service providers, if educated and engaged, can help with prevention and early intervention work.
6. Engaging schools (teachers, counselors, and liaisons) who play an important role by being active in identifying runaway and homeless youth. However the role of McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaisons within school districts needs more clarity, monitoring and resources.
7. Integration of service planning and access to services (mental health, substance use, health, domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, legal, child welfare) for youth in rural locations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

While the data suggests rural homelessness among youth is different, what is less well known is how the informal system which seems to support rural youth functions. How does the system work to support youth who stay in school? How do youth know about this system and how do they access this system to remain in their communities? Are there commonalties among these informal systems that can serve as programming opportunities? These are all areas for further study.

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