Count Us In

Could 2017 be a pivotal year for homeless youth and HIV?

April 3, 2017 By Casey Halter

Each January, an army of advocates take to local streets, service organizations and shelters to help put a number on the U.S. homeless population.

Their efforts are part of an initiative called the Point-in-Time (PIT) count, organized annually by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to represent a one-night snapshot of homelessness across the country.

“Where did you sleep last night?” a social worker might ask a person signing in for the night at a suburban shelter. “What sorts of services do you need?”

Meanwhile, in a nearby city, a care-linkage specialist may ask a young visitor at a drop-in center, “Is this the first time you have been homeless?”

By the end of the year, information gathered by PIT initiatives will be compiled into a national report that is sent to Congress and used by the federal government to make decisions about which services—from shelter beds to HIV care—should be provided to homeless communities across the country.

However, housing advocates working on the ground say one population has long eluded HUD’s Point-in-Time counts and services: homeless youth. According to new rules set forth last year by the federal organization, 2017 was supposed to be the year when these kids were finally counted.

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“It’s really hard to make progress on an issue when you don’t know what your baseline is,” says Samantha Wiese, program manager at All Home King County, an organization that serves homeless youth and young adults in Seattle.

At All Home, Wiese helps run the PIT initiative Count Us In!, which has surveyed homeless and at-risk youth for the past seven years—making it one of the longest-running and extensive counts of its kind in the United States.

As the head of its local continuum of care (CoC) network, All Home tasks volunteers from more

than 70 local organizations—including housing programs, homeless shelters, local libraries, HIV clinics, LGBT centers, food pantries and community centers—with handing out surveys, hosting special "magnet events" and searching their local neighborhoods for homeless young people.

"Part of why I love Count Us In! is that we get to engage community partners that we don't see during the rest of the year," Wiese says. "We definitely see a lot of connections and interwovenness in these communities."

All Home's PIT survey questions address kids' demographic information, education, employment, family history and all the places a kid has spent the night during the last three months. Ultimately, the count's main aim is to give providers a full and thorough picture of the issues facing homeless kids in their communities.

When asked about the significance of this year's count in the fight against youth homelessness, Wiese laughs. Like a lot of groups in other big cities across the country, including New York, San Francisco and Philadelphia, "All Home has been doing a youth count since before it was required."

In June 2016, HUD sent out a notice to its CoC members that it would be making it a national policy priority to "end youth homelessness" in the final months of the Obama administration. Then in August, the federal housing authority sent community partners another notice stating that its first task in meeting this goal would be to conduct a massive nationwide count of homeless youth in 2017—the first of its kind since 1999.

The August memo explained that this year's count would serve as the baseline against which all data on homeless youth across the country would be compared at HUD. CoCs were encouraged to try to get their highest, most accurate Point-in-Time counts to date in order to help better represent the population.

And in January, right before the 2017 presidential inauguration, HUD announced the recipients of $33 million in federal grants awarded to pilot programs in 10 cities that both serve homeless young people and aim to prevent homelessness.

Until this year, HUD's annual Point-in-Time counts had accounted for only 549,928 homeless youth across the country. However, advocates like Wiese estimate that the number is closer to 1.7 million kids—a population yet to be recorded in official government housing data.

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Historically, one of the main reasons it has been so hard to get an accurate number on homeless youth in the United States is simple, says Marisa Sims, MSW, a community health specialist at Harvest House and Kaleida Health Youth Link in Buffalo: A lot of these kids don't want to be counted. "They're kind of that hidden homeless," Sims explains. "They either don't know they're homeless, or it's not being reported."

Along with her coworker Felicia Cruz, a care-linkage specialist, Sims works with inner-city homeless and unstably housed youth ages 13 to 24, providing sexual health services, PrEP services, HIV primary care and testing for sexually transmitted infections and HIV across Buffalo. The grant-funded program considers homeless youth one of the most at-risk groups for HIV in today's epidemic.

For the past few years, Sims and Cruz have joined the Western New York Homeless Alliance and the Western New York Coalition for the Homeless on the front lines of annual Point-in-Time counts for their city. In doing so, the two community health workers have uncovered firsthand the barriers that PIT workers often face while trying to reach an accurate count of the homeless youth population.

Consider, for example, a kid who runs away from his religiously conservative home after coming out as queer or a young woman who flees abuse from a family member at home, says Sims. "If they're under 18 and their parents have put in a runaway report to the police—they show up at the shelter, and the shelter has to turn them in. That just sends them back to a place that may not be safe."

That's why instead of seeking services or shelter through official organizations, homeless youth, say advocates, often take matters into their own hands: couch surfing with friends, doubling up in apartments with other families or even sleeping in abandoned buildings or so-called drug houses to stay safe, anonymous and out of sight.

"A lot of our homeless youth also engage in risky activities just for food, money, a place to stay," adds Cruz. "That may play into having unprotected sex with somebody they don't know or having and staying with multiple partners, things like that."

"And they don't see themselves as homeless because they have a roof over their heads," Sims chimes in.

The issue is compounded by the fact that HUD's Point-in-Time counts have long defined homelessness in terms of a rigid, highly limited dichotomy—either literally living on the streets or staying in a shelter. These youth, who are unstably housed and hopping from place to place, are often not "homeless enough" to be counted under current federal guidelines.

As a result, there are only 21,203 beds currently set aside for unaccompanied youth and other youth-only households across the country.

But this year, thanks to longstanding efforts by advocates like Cruz, Sims and Wiese—who have been involved in efforts to count and reach out to homeless youth for years—HUD has set out to expand its definition of homeless youth, asking advocates to finally find and count kids who aren't "traditionally homeless" and to document their experiences.

At the end of the day, "Having a Point-in-Time count lets you know what kinds of services you need available to help them," Cruz says. And it's the youth-count workers in 2017 who are on the front lines of that effort.

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Meanwhile, in Louisville, Kentucky, Natalie Harris, director of the city's Coalition for the Homeless, is focused on the potential financial impact of the 2017 Point-in-Time count on youth-focused housing programs across the county.

Harris helps oversee more than 30 community service providers across the Appalachian city that work to address various symptoms of homelessness. These providers include traditional services like shelters and drop-in centers, legal aid, domestic violence programs and other supportive structures.

"We work to coordinate their efforts to try and figure out what the gaps in services are and figure out how to fill those gaps with funding," Harris explains. "When we apply to HUD for our continuum of care money, we complete a lot of data that has to do with the Point-in-Time count."

Last year, the coalition took it upon itself to devise a plan to end youth homelessness across the

city after noting that the federal government was drastically underserving young homeless people. As they did in Buffalo and Seattle, dozens of providers and hundreds of volunteers canvassed Louisville in January to help out with the PIT count initiative.

“One thing that really surprised us about young adults in Louisville is that while some populations or races are getting more opportunities since the economy has gotten better, our African-American population has not,” says Harris, referencing the recovery since the 2008 recession, which hit rural and Southern cities particularly hard. “That tells us that we need to think about the institutional racism that is causing some of our populations to miss out.”

According to Harris, the higher the number of homeless youth counted during these efforts, the more money communities like hers will receive for its housing initiatives. The PIT counts also let the government know where it’s best to spend that money. This is a big deal when only 5 percent of the $5 billion spent annually assisting the homeless goes toward homeless youth and children.

PIT counts will also force the government to reckon with some of the kids most at risk for homelessness in the United States—such as LGBT kids, who make up nearly 40 percent of the homeless youth population in this country, kids aging out of the foster care system, survivors of human trafficking and those affected directly or indirectly by the country’s ongoing opioid epidemic.

“I think we’ve learned a lot about how to serve people who have become homeless, but we haven’t learned anything about how to prevent it,” says Harris. According to the advocate, getting an accurate number and picture of what’s driving these kids to the street is crucial to funding the programs that may help stop youth homelessness before it starts.

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Over the next few months, community health organizations across the country will begin tallying the data on homeless youth they collected this winter and entering the numbers into their annual CoC reports to send to HUD for funding. But now that the groundwork has been completed, one big question remains: What will the federal government do in response to their findings?

Many advocates worry about the future of HUD now that it's under the authority of President Donald Trump and his HUD director, Ben Carson, a man with no experience in federal housing, who's known for his opposition to the Section 8 program and has been quoted as saying government aid can make people "too dependent."

"I'd be lying if I said that I'm not concerned about the possibility of going backward over the next four years," said former HUD director Julian Castro in a January interview with NPR shortly before the 2017 inauguration.

"It is very scary when I think about how the new administration will affect the individuals that we're working with," says Marisa Sims from Buffalo. "I don't really know how to prepare the patients I'm really worried about—who don't have an education, who may be a single parent, who

are living with HIV, who have a mental health diagnosis.”

The uncertainty leaves only one option for advocates in the war against youth homelessness for at least the next four years: to keep fighting, keep serving and, most of all, keep counting.

KIDS AT RISK

A snapshot of the links between youth homelessness and HIV in the United States.

- Every year, an estimated 1.3 million to 1.7 million youth between ages 13 and 24 are counted as homeless in the United States.
- HIV rates among homeless youth nationwide are thought to be as much as two to 10 times higher than the rates among the rest of their peers.
- Between 15 and 30 percent of homeless youth say they have engaged in sex work and other risky behavior in exchange for basic needs.
- An estimated 20 to 40 percent of homeless youth in the United States identify as LGBTQ.
- Up to 50 percent of LGBTQ homeless youth are considered “likely” or “very likely” to someday test positive for HIV.

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