VOICES OF YOUTH COUNT

Conducting a Youth Count: A Toolkit

Empowering and Engaging Youth and Communities For a Better Count

2018

ChapinHall at the University of Chicago

Policy research that benefits children, families, and their communities

Background and Acknowledgements

Voices of Youth Count (VoYC) is a national policy and research initiative designed to link evidence and action by capturing the diverse experiences of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness, or who have runaway, more clearly defining the size of the population, and driving compelling knowledge into the hands of the broad national community dedicated to ending youth homelessness.

Committed to widely disseminating our learning, resources, and recommendations, *Conducting a Youth Count: A Toolkit* documents one of many VoYC activities. It describes the VoYC Youth Count approach conducted in 22 communities throughout the summer of 2016; capturing our learning and providing guidance and tools to all communities looking to improve the ways they count youth experiencing homelessness.

The information in this toolkit is the outcome of a collaboration with the many thoughtful and committed organizations and individuals who have partnered with the VoYC Policy and Research Team from Chapin Hall to carry out the VoYC Youth Counts. These valued partners include the VoYC Technical Advisors who provided critical guidance on methodology, Applied Survey Research, Inc., our count implementation partner in the field, as well as hundreds of youth, service providers, government agencies, educational institutions, funders, and individuals from the 22 VoYC partner communities:

Ada County, ID (Boise)	*King County, WA (Seattle)*
Alameda County, CA (Oakland)	*Livingston County, MO*
Boyd County, KY	*Mariposa County, CA*
Cecil County, MD	*Orange County, FL (Orlando)*
Cleveland County, OK	*Orleans Parish, LA (New Orleans)*
Cook County, IL (Chicago)	*Philadelphia County, PA (Philadelphia)*
Davidson County, TN (Nashville)	*San Diego County, CA (San Diego)*
Delaware County, OH	*Suffolk County, MA (Boston)*
Denver County, CO (Denver)	*Travis County, TX (Austin)*
Hennepin County, MN (Minneapolis)	*Walla Walla County, WA*
Kennebec County, ME	*Wayne County, MI (Detroit)*

VoYC is led by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, an independent policy research center focused on providing public and private decision-makers with rigorous data analysis and achievable solutions to support them in improving the lives of children, youth, and families.

To learn more about Voices of Youth Count, our ongoing research, and additional resources, visit our website at www.voicesofyouthcount.org.

For more information about the guidance and resources in this toolkit, please contact us at: voyc@chapinhall.org.

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Contents

How to use this Toolkit

This toolkit provides a step-by-step roadmap to conduct a youth count using the VoYC methodology. It is organized into five phases, each with guidance describing the phase, steps within the phase, and links to helpful templates and tools. Within the guidance, you will find an overview of the phase and details about how the VoYC Youth Counts were implemented, including our lessons learned. The associated tools contain explanations that are more detailed about how to complete each step.

This toolkit is intended for the person(s) leading the organization and execution of the youth count. This reflects the structure of the VoYC Youth Count methodology, in which members of a Leadership Team were the primary planners of the Youth Count, with the strong support and involvement of the Stakeholder Team, the broader community of stakeholders who were engaged at critical points in the process.

The table of contents on the preceding page can help you find the sections you most need. There is also a visual overview of the VoYC Youth Count process included as a tool in Phase One. The tools and templates are embedded in the guidance and you can also find a complete list of them organized by phase in the appendix.

If you have never conducted a count before, we recommend reading through the toolkit guidance in full before beginning to plan your youth count.

Key Terms

Guides—young people ages 18-25 who have experienced homelessness or housing instability who help conduct the youth count

Leadership Team—the group of key stakeholders who are responsible for overseeing and ensuring the success of the youth count

Stakeholder Team—the broader group of community members and providers who are invested in ending youth homelessness and help with recruitment and implementation of the youth count

Team Leaders—provider staff or community volunteers with experience working with young people and doing outreach, who provide transportation and logistical support to the Guides conducting the Street Count

Team Captains—individuals who run the deployment sites during the Street Count

Introduction

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homeless (USICH) Opening Doors Plan calls for ending homelessness among unaccompanied youth by 2020. There is widespread agreement among policy makers, service providers, advocates, and many others that achieving this goal requires better data about the number and characteristics of youth experiencing homelessness, and stronger, more coordinated federal, state, and local systems of support for youth. USICH has amended and supplemented the Opening Doors Plan with important tools to support progress: the Federal Framework to End Youth Homelessness, a blueprint for community response laid out in Preventing, and Ending Youth Homelessness: A Coordinated Community Response, and Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Youth Homelessness.

Voices of Youth Count (VoYC) is a national policy and research initiative designed to accelerate progress toward the 2020 goal, linking evidence and action by:

- documenting the diverse experiences of runaway, unaccompanied homeless youth ages 13-25 years old

- more clearly defining the size of the population

- delivering actionable information to the field dedicated to ending youth homelessness

Developing capacity to address the needs of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness at the national, state, and local levels requires credible estimates of their number and over-represented sub-populations. Yet, no single source of data provides the full picture of how many youth in the U.S. are experiencing homelessness or which groups of youth are disproportionately represented.

One important source of data for determining the size and demographics of a community's population of youth experiencing homelessness is through a point-in-time (PIT) count. Typically, communities conduct PIT counts of homeless populations in January during the biennial count mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Accurately counting unaccompanied homeless youth using methods developed for counting homeless adults and families has been challenging. Youth experiencing homelessness may be found at different times and locations than older individuals or families, and many do not want to be found or do not think of themselves as being homeless.

In recent years, many communities have worked to improve their practices for counting youth. Building upon and incorporating many of those promising practices, VoYC developed and consistently applied a youth-centered count with 22 diverse partner communities. These youth counts were conducted with the goals of: 1) improving the accuracy of the methods used to count youth experiencing homelessness; and 2) collecting original data to understand disproportionately represented groups of youth experiencing homelessness.

It is important to note that VoYC includes several other research activities that will provide a more holistic understanding of the lives of youth experiencing homelessness. We strongly encourage you to visit the [VoYC website](#) to understand our Youth Count and Brief Youth Survey efforts within the broader context of

the other research activities of the initiative. Our Research-to-Impact briefs integrate findings about subpopulations of youth from across the research activities or deeply explore one research activity.

A More Inclusive Count: The VoYC Youth Count Approach

The key features of the VoYC Youth Count approach included:

- Counting the comprehensive population of youth experiencing homelessness to be reflective of the diversity of youth experiences. VoYC's Youth Counts included youth between the ages of 13-25 years old who indicated that they did not have a stable place to stay, including youth who were:
    - sheltered (i.e., sleeping in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or hotels or motels),
    - unsheltered (i.e., sleeping on the streets, in parks, or otherwise outside; in vehicles or abandoned buildings/vacant units; on trains/buses or in train/bus stations; or at 24-hour restaurants, laundromats, or other retail establishments), or
    - stayed in someone's home (i.e., their own home, the home of a friend/girlfriend/boyfriend, a foster or group home, a hospital/emergency room, a residential treatment facility, the home of someone the youth had sex with, or at a juvenile detention center or jail).
- Empowering current and formerly homeless youth as experts and full participants in the planning and execution of the youth count to both improve accuracy of the count and ensure the process is inclusive of their experiences.
- Engaging a broad set of community stakeholders and service providers who are connected to the range of youth experiencing homelessness, including diversity in age, housing circumstances, and identification (e.g., LGBTQ, juvenile justice or foster care system involved, pregnant or parenting) and play a role in supporting them. They include homeless service providers, youth-serving organizations, social service agencies, education and employment service providers, representatives from the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and funders.

Visual Count and Brief Youth Survey

The VoYC Youth Counts were held over a 24-hour period on different dates for each of the VoYC 22 partner communities throughout the summer of 2016. VoYC compensated youth to help plan the Youth Counts, including identifying when and where to conduct the count. Youth, referred to as Guides, were also hired to conduct the Youth Counts. During the count, data was gathered in two ways: a visual count and a brief youth survey:

- A Visual Count gathered the Guides' perception about the age, sex, race and parenting status through the use of a tally sheet.
- A Brief Youth Survey captured data about the characteristics of youth (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation), current living circumstances, histories of foster care and justice system involvement, school and employment status, and pregnancy and parenting status. Youth were offered a $5 gift card for completing the survey.

One of the major lessons learned from VoYC is that it is critical to accompany any visual count with a survey. Many of the youth who were counted during the visual count were not 13-25 or were stably housed. In fact, 37 percent of the youth who completed the VoYC survey were excluded from the count because they indicated they had a stable place to stay. Youth who are experiencing homelessness may go to great lengths

to not appear homeless and are not visually distinguishable from youth who are stably housed. Thus, it is important to conduct a survey in tandem with the visual count to gain a more accurate and complete understanding of who the youth counted are and their living situations.

Multiple Location Strategy

The VoYC Youth Counts included data collection in a variety of settings to ensure maximum reach to the range of youth experiences of homelessness.

- The Street Count, which incorporates both the Visual Count and the Brief Youth Survey, is organized around "hot spots", which are locations where youth experiencing homelessness are known to be found. Focus groups with youth experiencing homelessness, as well as the service providers, were held to identify these locations and the best days and times to count. These locations were then turned into maps, which the teams of Guides and Team Leaders used to count and survey youth experiencing homelessness.

- The Organizational Count includes only the Brief Youth Survey. Surveys were administered by Guides, staff, or other volunteers to youth in shelters, drop-in centers, transitional living programs and other organizations where youth received services on the day of the count.

- The "Come and Be Counted" locations include sites such as parks or service locations where, through service providers, social media, and other forms of outreach, youth who may not be easily found on the street or in shelters are made aware of the opportunity to be surveyed. Guides or volunteers administered the survey.

The VoYC Youth Counts were conducted for research purposes and were overseen by the University of Chicago/Chapin Hall's Institutional Review Board (IRB), also referred to as an ethics committee, to ensure the protection of human subjects. The IRB ensured protections were in place, such as placing limits on how youth could be recruited to take the Brief Youth Survey and clearly specifying the risks and benefits from taking the survey in the Brief Youth Survey consent script. For youth counts conducted outside the context of a research effort, these specific details may not apply. Nevertheless, precautions should be taken to ensure that participation in a survey is voluntary and that the safety and privacy of youth are protected. ✤

Conducting VoYC Youth Counts within HUD PIT Counts

The VoYC Youth Counts were conducted as stand-alone events, independent of other counts. More often, a youth count will be part of the comprehensive HUD PIT Count. Integration with the HUD PIT Count will influence some of your decisions. For example, the schedule and timeline for the youth count will need to be determined in the context of the larger count, your plan for deduplicating data will need to account for multiple opportunities to complete the survey, and the structure of committees who plan and conduct the youth count may need to be adjusted to fit within the larger planning structure. In particular, your choices about who to count, how to count, and the survey tools to use will be impacted. For example, the survey used in the VoYC Youth Counts does not contain all of the information that HUD requires Continuums of Care to report. It is important to understand the different requirements and ensure that your decisions will allow you to gather the data you need for HUD, other funders, and advocacy efforts.

Phase One
Get Started

Phase One, Get Started, includes the foundational steps to conducting a successful youth count. Thinking through the logistical aspects of the youth count at the outset will allow you to prioritize your energy on youth and community engagement and recruitment during the planning process.

In Phase One, you will establish and convene a Leadership Team. The Leadership Team is a small group of well-connected individuals, whose varying expertise is important to planning a youth count, including experience with homelessness, and knowledge of the municipal system, the continuum of care, and the provider system. The Leadership Team oversees all aspects of the planning process, makes decisions about logistics, and develops initial recommendations about how to organize and engage youth and providers in the planning process. The Leadership Team ensures that all planning steps happen and the youth count is conducted successfully.

During the Initial Leadership Team Meeting, which is Step Two of this Phase, the Leadership Team identifies the broader community of stakeholders, the Stakeholder Team, with connections to the diversity of young people experiencing homelessness in the community. The Stakeholder Team participates in meetings to review and finalize the plans for organizing and engaging youth and providers in the youth count planning process, and is actively involved in recruitment and implementation of the youth count. The Stakeholder Team ensures that the youth count plans are inclusive and reflect the diversity of youth experiences, and leverage their relationships to support youth participation in planning and conducting the youth count.

Step One: Establish the Leadership Team

Establish a Leadership Team Tools

☐ [Potential Leadership Team and Stakeholder Team Members](#)

Planning and conducting a successful youth count requires extensive outreach to, and engagement of, a wide array of community members at the outset of the planning process. The steps in planning the count and the timeline for completing activities assumes that the community has established partnerships to draw on. If that is not the case in your community, consider allotting extra weeks of planning to build those relationships before beginning to plan the youth count. Establishing relationships and creating buy-in to address youth homelessness before you begin planning the youth count will make the process go more smoothly.

We recommend creating two teams, a Leadership Team and a Stakeholder Team, to plan and execute the youth count. The Leadership Team will oversee all aspects of the planning process and engage the broader set of providers and community groups with connections to homeless youth. This larger group of

stakeholders, the Stakeholder Team, will review and finalize the youth count plans and help recruit young people who reflect the diversity of experiences of homelessness in the community to help plan and conduct the youth count.

The Leadership Team should reflect your community's expertise, including experience with homelessness, relationships with the broad array of service providers who work with youth experiencing homelessness, organizing counts, and community infrastructure. We recommend reviewing the Potential Leadership Team and Stakeholder Team Members as you think about the people to engage in the Leadership Team and subsequently the Stakeholder Team.

If you are unfamiliar with service providers in the community, we encourage you to review the lists of HUD-funded and HHS-funded homeless services organizations in the area and contact the McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaisons at local schools. The HUD-funded organizations can be found by reviewing the agencies included in your Continuum of Care's most recent housing inventory count. The HHS-funded organizations can be found by looking at the Family and Youth Services Bureau grantees.

The composition of your leadership team may be vary depending on the size of your community and the existing infrastructure for serving youth. One person may fulfill more than one role on the Leadership Team.

The Leadership Team should include:

- A **project manager** who oversees the process and ensures that all steps are completed;
- A staff member from the **continuum of care** who can engage the breadth of the homeless-serving sector;
- An individual who helps organize the community's **point-in-time** count who has experience overseeing counts;
- A **service provider** who is well-connected and well-respected by the broader service provider community;
- A **senior municipal employee** who can get support and involvement from various municipal agencies (such as libraries, police and transit); and,
- **Young people** who have experienced homelessness.

Step Two: Convene the Initial Leadership Team Meeting

Initial Leadership Team Meeting Tools

- ☐ Initial Leadership Team Meeting Annotated Agenda
- ☐ Overview of VoYC Youth Count Process
- ☐ Voices of Youth Count Brief Youth Survey
- ☐ Youth Count Timeline Planning Tool
- ☐ Potential Leadership Team and Stakeholder Team Members (Phase One Step One)
- ☐ Focus Group Planning Worksheet

The Initial Leadership Team Meeting is a detailed planning session at which a draft plan for the overall youth count process and logistics are developed. The meeting will take approximately 2.5 hours to 4 hours, depending on the length of discussion about each time, with additional time needed for follow up on the next steps identified during the course of the meeting. The meeting can also be broken up into multiple, shorter meetings, with one meeting to plan the youth count logistics, and another meeting to develop the youth compensation plan, identify the stakeholder team members and prepare for the focus groups.

The Initial Leadership Team Meeting should cover the following topics:

- ✓ Define **Who** to Count
- ✓ Determine **Where** to Count
- ✓ Determine **How** to Count
- ✓ Pick a **Survey** Tool
- ✓ Develop a **Timeline** for the Youth Count
- ✓ Plan the Tentative Youth Count **"Day-Of"** Schedule
- ✓ Identify **Deployment** Sites
- ✓ Develop the Youth **Compensation** Plan
- ✓ Identify the **Stakeholder Team** Members
- ✓ Prepare for the **Focus Groups**

Detailed guidance for conducting the Initial Leadership Team Meeting is included in the Initial Leadership Team Meeting Annotated Agenda. We discuss the decisions made for VoYC Youth Counts below.

Define **Who** to Count

The VoYC Youth Count focused on unaccompanied youth ages 13-25 experiencing homelessness, including youth who are couch surfing, doubled up, staying with friends, saying with family, or involved in the sex trade, in addition to youth staying in shelters, transitional housing programs, staying in hotels/motels, sleeping in cars, or living on the street. We chose this target population so it was inclusive of the definitions used by the federal agencies funding services for homeless youth: the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Education (DOE). The age range matches the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, which guides HHS funding, and is similar to the definition of homelessness in the McKinney-Vento Act, which guides DOE funding. This target population is in line with the USICH guidance in Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Youth Homelessness in which USICH calls upon communities to identify all unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness—not just those experiencing homelessness as defined by HUD.[1]

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[1] U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (2018). *Criteria and benchmarks for achieving the goal of ending youth homelessness*. Washington, DC: USICH.

Determine **Where** to Count

The VoYC Youth Counts counted and surveyed youth in three ways: a Street Count, an Organizational Count, and "Come and Be Counted" Locations. We used this multiple location strategy to reach the diversity of youth we were trying to count.

Determine **How** to Count

The VoYC Youth Counts gathered data in two ways: a Visual Count and a Brief Youth Survey. During the Visual Count, the Guides documented perceived information about the youth they encountered who they believed to be homeless and between the ages of 13-25. During the Brief Youth Survey, Guides approached the same young people to complete a survey, gathering information about the characteristics of youth (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation), current living circumstances, histories of foster care and justice system involvement, school and employment status, and pregnancy and parenting status.

We found pros and cons to each method:

The Visual Count ensured that all youth could be counted, even those who were sleeping or left the area before being surveyed. The Visual Count also allowed the teams to count youth who they were unable to approach for safety or other reasons. However, we also found that many of the youth the teams counted and subsequently surveyed were not homeless or were not in the age range of youth we were attempting to count. Youth who are experiencing homelessness are often not visually distinguishable from youth who are stably housed.

The Brief Youth Survey allowed the teams to gather information about youth and confirm their housing status. However, at times, youth left the area before our teams could conduct surveys and youth were not always interested in completing the surveys when approached.

Therefore, <u>we found it critical to use both approaches</u>. One of the major lessons learned from the VoYC Youth Counts is that it is important to conduct a survey in tandem with the visual count in order to gain a more accurate and complete understanding of who the youth counted are and their living situations. Additionally, using a survey allowed us to gather information about over-represented subpopulations of youth experiencing homelessness, which is critical for designing targeted interventions. Communities may want to consider reversing the VoYC order: instruct teams to survey all youth and only complete a visual count in instances when the survey is not possible (e.g., a youth is sleeping). This emphasizes the importance of the survey.

For the VoYC Youth Counts, the Guides conducted the Youth Count, making decisions about who to count and survey, and the Team Leaders provided transportation and logistical support. Using a peer-driven approach was central to the VoYC Youth Count approach and was vital for their success.

Pick a **Survey** Tool

For the VoYC Youth Counts, we used a Brief Youth Survey comprised of just 16 questions. We kept the survey brief to increase the likelihood that all youth would answer all of the questions. In designing the

survey and making decisions about how to administer it, we balanced a concern for the comfort of the youth being surveyed and the Guides conducting the survey so that we gathered the most important information.

The survey was framed as a survey about housing experiences, not homelessness. We did not want the youth who were surveyed to think they had been selected because someone believed they were homeless and because youth often do not identify as being homeless.

We also asked Guides to complete full surveys with everyone they approached, even if the responses indicated they were likely stably housed. The Street Count teams often approached groups of youth to ask them to do surveys. In case youth discussed the experience of being surveyed with their peers after the fact, we wanted them all to be asked the same questions so that youth did not think they were singled out because of their housing status. Having the Guides administer the survey in the same way for everyone also made it easier to do and improved the data quality.

We sequenced the questions so that the most important information, the youth's age and housing status, were asked first, and the questions we thought would be most sensitive, about gender identity and sexual orientation, were asked last.

We tested our survey with young people in some of our partner communities before using it for the first Youth Count to make sure that the questions and response options were understandable.

Note: If you are conducting a youth count during your annual HUD Point-in-Time, you will need to modify the VoYC Survey tool because it does not collect all of the information that HUD requires to be reported.

Develop a **Timeline** for the Youth Count

The VoYC Youth Count timeline was developed by first identifying the date(s) of the Youth Count. When determining the Youth Count date(s), we ensured there were no conflicts with local festivals and events. Very few Youth Counts were held on Fridays because of concerns about Guide and volunteer recruitment for the Youth Count.

We worked backward from the date of the Youth Count to determine when to hold the focus groups and planning activities. Most of the VoYC Youth Counts were planned and executed over 10-12 weeks. This timeline can be compressed or extended if needed, but we recommend that there is no more than 5 weeks between focus groups and the youth count to ensure that the information gathered during the focus groups is as current as possible. Establishing partnerships and relationships can be quite time consuming, so consider extending the youth count timeline to allow more time to engage new partners.

The Youth Count Timeline Planning Tool is provided to assist in this process.

Having selected the date for the youth count, we encourage you to send a save-the-date to volunteers who can help conduct the youth count, such as volunteers who have helped with the HUD PIT Count, or volunteers connected to provider organizations.

Plan the Tentative Youth Count **"Day-Of"** Schedule

The VoYC Youth Counts were conducted in a single 24-hour period, with multiple shifts of teams deployed during the Youth Count. Most communities used fewer, longer shifts to reduce the number of volunteers needed to implement the Youth Count. Street Count teams who had to do a lot of walking often needed a mid-shift break to rest and get more food to eat.

In some communities, youth were missed because they did not learn about the count until it was over. Communities may choose to conduct a multiday count to reduce the likelihood that youth will be missed. Multiday counts require more resources and community support and can increase the risk that some youth will be double counted. However, this risk can be mitigated by collecting information in the survey, such as date of birth and initials, which can be used to identify youth who may have been counted more than once. See Phase 5 for more information about cleaning and deduplicating your data.

Identify **Deployment** Sites

We determined the number of deployment sites based on the geographic size of the count area, accessibility to transportation, and traffic concerns, as well as safety considerations. We limited the number of deployment sites, finding it helpful to have more people coming to a fewer number of locations in case fewer, or different, people than expected showed up to participate in the youth count. Organizations that already have 24-hour staff were often the best able to offer space in the early morning and late evening.

Develop Youth **Compensation** Plan

The success of the VoYC Youth Count hinged on having young people with current or recent experience of homelessness participate in the planning and execution of the count. Providing financial compensation for their time and expertise was essential to the successful and sustained engagement of youth in count efforts. In addition to the financial compensation, the training and experience provided youth with an important professional development opportunity. Youth were paid $10/hour, and provided transportation assistance, food, and snacks during all VoYC activities.

Youth who completed a Brief Youth Survey were provided a $5 gift card. We selected the gift cards based on input from the young people who participated in the focus groups. The incentive amount was selected to be appealing, while not so substantial that youth felt they may be coerced into completing the survey. You will end up needing to purchase more incentives than you will end up using to make sure that teams never run out. Communities should consider how they can use leftover incentives as they determine what incentives to provide.

Identify the **Stakeholder Team** Members

For the VoYC Youth Counts, we used the Potential Leadership Team and Stakeholder Team Members document to think about the types of stakeholders to include in the planning efforts to ensure the diversity of youth experiencing homelessness were reflected in the Youth Count.

When recruiting organizations, we found it equally important to identify the right people: program staff were more likely to have direct connections and knowledge about the young people who participated in the VoYC Youth Counts.

This conversation may take a substantial amount of time depending on how much organizations in your community already work together. Brainstorming new organizations and groups to engage can help increase the number and diversity of young people found during the youth count.

Prepare for the **Focus Groups**

The focus groups are facilitated meetings to learn about where youth experiencing homelessness spend time from the people most knowledgeable about them—young people and the service providers who support them. For the VoYC Youth Counts, we found it helpful for the Leadership Team to prepare a proposed plan in advance of the Focus Group Planning Meeting, allowing the Stakeholder Team to spend most of its time developing a recruitment plan to ensure the focus groups were representative of the diversity of youth in the community.

> Often, young people are not connected to traditional homeless services agencies, but instead are receiving support from youth-services organizations, religious institutions or other community organizations that need to be engaged.

We used the Focus Group Planning Worksheet to track the Leadership Team's proposed plan, which we then updated during the Focus Group Planning Meeting.

We found it helpful to have different perspectives in the focus groups, as it generated hot spots that may have otherwise been overlooked. We only held focus groups for specific subpopulations (such as trans/gender non-conforming youth) when there were concerns about safety. We also found it helpful to hold focus groups at provider locations, such as drop-in centers, where youth were already congregating because we could recruit additional youth at the last minute if we had low turn-out despite recruitment efforts. ❧

Phase Two
Plan and Hold Focus Groups

Phase Two is the primary information-gathering phase for the youth count. During the focus groups, you will learn from youth, and the providers who work with them, about the hot spots where youth experiencing homelessness spend time. The focus groups also generate lists of provider and community locations for the Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted Locations. The Leadership and Stakeholder Teams will use the focus group information to finalize a day-of count strategy for reaching youth experiencing homelessness.

Step One: Convene the Focus Group Planning Meeting

Focus Group Planning Meeting Tools

- ☐ [Focus Group Planning Meeting Invitation](#)
- ☐ [Focus Group Planning Worksheet](#) (Phase One, Step Two)
- ☐ [Focus Group Planning Meeting Annotated Agenda](#)

The goal of the Focus Group Planning Meeting is to review and finalize the plan for the focus groups. We found it helpful to have the Leadership Team develop draft recommendations in advance of the Focus Group Planning Meeting. Please review Phase One, Step Two, Convene the Initial Leadership Team Meeting, for more information about preparing for the Focus Group Planning Meeting.

The Focus Group Planning Meeting objectives can be accomplished in 90-minutes. For some VoYC Youth Counts, we scheduled longer meetings to allow more time to develop youth recruitment plans. While the Focus Group Planning Meeting can be held via conference call, we found the meetings were more productive when held in person.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Stakeholder Team will have:

- ✓ Reviewed the youth count logistics
- ✓ Discussed the role of youth in planning and conducting the youth count
- ✓ Finalized the focus group schedule
- ✓ Developed a recruitment plan
- ✓ Identified preferred locations for the focus groups and a plan to reserve space
- ✓ Developed a focus group facilitation plan

Guidance on conducting the meeting is included in the Focus Group Planning Meeting Annotated Agenda.

> Rather than canvassing every area of a community, the VoYC Youth Counts use a targeted approach, focusing on the hot spots where young people are known to spend time.

Step Two: Recruit Focus Group Participants

Focus Group Recruitment Tools

- Focus Group Recruitment Language
- Youth Focus Group Recruitment Language
- Youth Focus Group Recruitment Flyer
- Focus Group Recruitment Plan Template

Successful focus group recruitment is an important step to ensuring the diversity of your community's youth experiencing homelessness are included in the youth count.

For the VoYC Youth Counts, we recruited youth primarily through providers. We gave providers language and flyers to use to aid in recruitment. Young people reaching out to their peers was often the most effective way to get service-averse youth engaged in the Youth Counts; this can take a lot of time, as it first requires young people to trust you and the purpose for the youth count. Youth were also recruited at provider programs and community events.

Consider using a range of recruitment strategies, including recruiting youth through existing youth advisory boards. If your community does not have one yet, planning and conducting the youth count can be a good foundation for creating one.

For the VoYC Youth Counts, we often created shared documents to track our recruitment goals and progress toward these goals. An example of a tracking tool, the Focus Group Recruitment Plan Template, is provided and can shared with all contributors via a document sharing hub or email.

Step Three: Hold the Focus Groups

Focus Group Tools

- Hot Spotting Worksheet
- Youth Focus Group Facilitation Protocol
- Provider Focus Group Facilitation Protocol

The focus groups elicit information to develop a strategy for the Street Count including:
- Location of the hot spots
- The best time of day to count at each hot spot
- How many people are likely to be found at each hot spot
- Logistical information, such as agencies working in the area or safety concerns

The focus groups also generate lists of provider and community locations for the Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted locations. The focus groups typically last 90 minutes.

Guidance on running the focus groups is included in the Youth and Provider Focus Group Protocols. We discuss the decisions made for VoYC Youth Counts below.

For VoYC focus groups, we focused on maintaining the privacy of the focus group participants and the confidentiality of the information they shared. During the youth focus groups, we did not ask youth to sign in, allowing them to remain anonymous if they chose to. We only collected names if youth wanted to work as Guides during the Youth Count.

We only shared information about the hot spots with people helping to conduct the Youth Count, and we never revealed who told us about a specific hot spot. Youth had particular concerns about how the focus group information would be used because they did not want to reveal or share information that might create unsafe conditions for other youth or be used by authorities in ways perceived as adverse to the youth's interests.

For most of the VoYC youth focus groups, the youth attended the focus groups run by VoYC staff with no providers in the room. At times, though, we found it helpful to have providers attend:

- Some youth preferred having a provider they knew in the meeting, rather than just "outsiders".
- Some youth were less experienced attending focus groups or meetings and extra staff helped ensure that all youth could fully participate in the focus groups.

While we preferred holding focus groups to learn about hot spots, we also held one-on-one conversations with youth or providers because of scheduling constraints, transportation difficulties, or individual preference, to make sure we could gather the expertise of all the people who knew the circumstances and locations of youth experiencing homelessness.

We gathered information in one of two ways: using Google Maps or using printed Hot Spotting Worksheets. We used Google Maps in most of the focus groups, relying solely on the worksheets only when we did not have internet access. When we used Google Maps, we also provided printed Hot Spotting Worksheets so people could take notes and share written feedback if they were not comfortable sharing in the group discussion. Using Google Maps allowed us to generate maps in real time, which we later organized into team assignments for the street count.

Example Google Map with hot spots

Unfamiliar with using Google Maps? Google has created some helpful instructions that will help you use the maps to pinpoint hot spots and generate maps. 🃏

Phase Three

Prepare for the Youth Count

Phase Three is the last phase before holding the youth count. During this phase, you will finalize all of the logistics for the youth count, hold the Count Strategy Meeting, recruit Guides, Team Leaders and other volunteers, and conduct the trainings for the youth count.

Step One: Convene the Leadership Team Count Planning Meeting

This second Leadership Team meeting allows the Leadership Team to finalize the youth count logistics and to prepare for the Count Strategy Meeting. The meeting will take approximately 90 minutes, with additional time needed for follow up.

Leadership Team Count Planning Meeting Tools

- ☐ Leadership Team Count Planning Meeting Annotated Agenda
- ☐ Count Strategy Planning Worksheet

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Leadership Team will have:

- ✓ Developed recommended Street Count Teams
- ✓ Developed recommended plans for the Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted locations
- ✓ Finalized the Day-Of Schedule
- ✓ Finalized the Day-Of Logistics
- ✓ Developed the volunteer recruitment plan

Detailed guidance on conducting the meeting is included in the Leadership Team Count Planning Meeting Annotated Agenda.

Step Two: Convene the Count Strategy Meeting

Count Strategy Meeting Tools

- ☐ Count Strategy Meeting Invitation
- ☐ Count Strategy Planning Worksheet (Phase Three, Step One)
- ☐ Count Strategy Meeting Annotated Agenda

The goal of the Count Strategy Meeting is to review and finalize the teams for the Street Count and the plans for the Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted Locations. The Stakeholder Team will also develop a recruitment plan and finalize all outstanding logistics for the youth count. We found it helpful to have the Leadership Team develop draft recommendations in advance of the Count Strategy Meeting. More information about preparing for the Count Strategy Meeting is in the preceding step.

The Count Strategy Meeting objectives can be accomplished in one hour. For some VoYC Youth Counts, we scheduled longer meetings to allow more time to develop recruitment plans. While the Count Strategy Meeting can be held via conference call, we found the meetings were more productive when held in person.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Stakeholder Team will have:

- ✓ Finalized the plan for Street Count teams and recruitment
- ✓ Finalized a list of Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted Locations and an outreach plan
- ✓ Developed a plan to respond to youth in-need during the youth count

Detailed guidance on conducting the meeting is included in the Count Strategy Meeting Annotated Agenda.

Step Three: Recruit Guides and Volunteers for the Youth Count

Youth Count Recruitment Tools

- ☐ [Guide Recruitment Flyer](#)
- ☐ [Guide Recruitment Language](#)
- ☐ [Organizational Count Outreach Language](#)
- ☐ [Come and Be Counted Flyer](#)

The goal of the recruitment phase is to recruit a sufficient number of knowledgeable Guides, Team Leaders, and other volunteers.

Guides should be young people ages 18-25 who are currently or recently experiencing homelessness. Guides are responsible for most of the primary data collection, including determining who to include in the Visual Count and conducting the Brief Youth Surveys. Guides will need to approach strangers to invite them to complete a survey.

> "We needed to get youth involved who we actually **serve**. It was one of the most **beautiful**, rich parts of the whole process."
>
> *Steven Jella*
> *Associate Executive Director*
> *San Diego Youth Services*

Team Leaders should be comfortable working with young people and preferably have experience conducting street outreach. They may be provider staff or volunteers. Team Leaders provide logistical and transportation support to Guides as they conduct the youth count. Team Leaders should have access to reliable transportation and a working cell phone, be able to oversee all of the paperwork, and be comfortable approaching strangers.

Volunteers conduct surveys at Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted locations. Volunteers should be comfortable working with young people. They must be able to administer the brief youth survey and be willing to engage with strangers.

We discuss the decisions made to recruit Guides, Team Leaders, and volunteers for VoYC Youth Counts below.

The more knowledgeable the Street Count teams were about the area in which they counted, the more successful they were in reaching youth during the VoYC Youth Count. Oftentimes, Guides had personal relationships with those that they were attempting to count and survey. These relationships proved to be critical in reaching and surveying youth.

While staff or youth may be connected to an agency, it does not mean that they know the area in the immediate vicinity well. When recruiting, work with each person to identify the area where they are most comfortable conducting the youth count.

Team Leaders need to be able to support the Guides as they conduct the youth count—from transportation assistance to coaching. Provide clear guidance to the Team Leaders during recruitment about their expected role during the youth count. Emphasize why a youth-led approach was selected, and encourage them to think of the youth count as both an information-gathering activity and a youth empowerment process.

Young people already engaged in the VoYC Youth Count planning process were often the best resource for recruiting other Guides. We were limited in using social media to recruit Guides for the VoYC Youth Counts because we had IRB approval to recruit only through informational flyers, but this often came up as a recommendation during the focus groups.

With so many people involved in recruitment, it can be hard to keep track of how the process is going. For the VoYC Youth Counts, we often created shared documents to track our recruitment goals for the Street Count Teams and progress toward these goals, which we maintained via a document sharing hub or which can be shared via email.

Step Four: Hold the Trainings

Training Tools

- ☐ [Guide Training Presentation](#)
- ☐ [Guide Training Protocol](#)
- ☐ [Team Leader Training Presentation](#)
- ☐ [Team Leader Training Protocol](#)
- ☐ [Volunteer Training Presentation](#)
- ☐ [Volunteer Training Protocol](#)

The goal of the trainings is to ensure that the information gathered in the field is accurately documented and that everyone remains safe during the youth count.

There are three trainings:
- A training for Guides
- A training for Team Leaders
- A training for staff and volunteers administering surveys for the Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted Locations.

Guidance on running the trainings is included in the training protocols. We discuss the decisions made for VoYC Youth Counts below.

We held the trainings for the Street Count teams, for the Guides and Team Leaders, in person so we could strongly emphasize safety considerations, practice administration of the survey and review how to approach youth to complete a survey. The Guide and Team Leader trainings take 60- to 90-minutes. The Guides and Team Leaders participated in separate trainings to review their roles and responsibilities. Some communities recommended holding combined trainings in the future to ensure a shared understanding of who was responsible for what and to help build connections amongst team members who did not already know each other.

We offered an online training for the staff and volunteers helping with the Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted Locations. In some communities, young people also administered surveys at Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted Locations. The online training takes approximately 10 minutes to complete. An example training can be found here. This training is shorter because individuals do not have to go to multiple locations and do not have to complete a tally sheet.

We kept track of who completed each type of training to ensure that everyone had participated in the appropriate training before conducting the Youth Count.

While in most communities, Guides and Team Leaders completed training immediately prior to the youth count, in some communities, they completed an initial training about a week before the Youth Count and another training immediately prior to the Youth Count so we could more extensively review how to conduct street outreach. This was done to help reinforce safe approaches to conducting street outreach when the Team Leaders were not seasoned outreach staff.

We had the Guides and Team Leaders practice administering the survey during the training to ensure that everyone understood the questions and the information they were collecting.

During the training with Team Leaders, we reviewed what their roles and expectations were and emphasized that their primarily role was to support the Guides as they conducted the Youth Count. We discussed the different types of assistance they might need to provide, such as helping Guides get between hot spots, helping Guides evaluate who to count and survey, and helping youth who asked for assistance.

Finally, we had the teams review their materials and develop a strategy for how they would cover their area.

Phase Four
Conduct the Youth Count

Phase Four focuses on the period of time selected to conduct the youth count. It includes conducting the Street Count and overseeing the Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted Locations.

Tip: Review all of the surveys and tally sheets as they are turned in following the Street Count, Organizational Count, and Come and Be Counted Locations, checking for accuracy and legibility, and reviewing any missed or incomplete questions.

Step One: Conduct the Street Count

Deployment Tools

- ☐ Street Count Deployment Log
- ☐ Street Count Deployment Guide
- ☐ Voices of Youth Count Survey (Phase One, Step Two)
- ☐ Voices of Youth Count Tally Sheet

The Team Captains, the deployment site staff, are responsible for overseeing the Street Count. They should arrive to the deployment site one hour before the Street Count teams are due to arrive, and should anticipate remaining at the deployment site until up to one hour after the last Street Count team returns.

Guidance on running the deployment site is included in the Street Count Deployment Guide. We discuss the decisions made for VoYC Youth Counts below.

For the VoYC Youth Counts, 2-3 people staffed each deployment site. This ensured that there was always someone at the deployment site, while the other staff would be available to run materials to teams in the street and troubleshoot other issues that arose.

The Street Count teams each managed their materials differently. Often, the Team Leaders carried the bags with the full collection of materials, while the Guides carried surveys and gift cards for a few surveys at a time.

In some communities, Street Count teams were given the full amount of gift cards we anticipated they would need at the start of the shift. In others, the Street Count teams only took a portion of the gift cards, choosing to return to the deployment site mid-shift to replenish because they felt unsafe carrying all of the gift cards at once.

Please note: The brief youth survey and tally sheet were developed to support a research study and may not gather all of the data expected by HUD or other funders. The survey also contains consent language

that reflects the requirements to protect human subjects overseen by the IRB. We recommend obtaining consent before conducting surveys, but encourage you to review the language and determine what consent makes sense for your approach.

Step Two: Oversee the Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted Locations

The Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted Locations need their materials in advance of the youth count time period. For the VoYC Youth Counts, we delivered materials to some locations on the day before the Youth Count and other locations picked up their materials from the deployment sites.

We encourage you to identify someone(s) to be in charge of the delivery and pick-up of the surveys for the Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted Locations who are different from the Team Captains. Provide the contact information of these identified individuals with all of the materials for the Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted Locations so they can be contacted with questions.

We recommend keeping a master list of all of the Organizational Count and Come and Be Counted Locations, with information about who the main point of contact is, the hours surveys will be completed, and the number of surveys and incentives provided.

Phase Five
Use the Data

Phase Five focuses on the cleaning and analysis of the data gathered during the youth count. The amount of information you gather will influence how long it takes to complete this phase.

Step One: Clean the Brief Youth Survey Data

Following the youth count, the data should be entered into a database, cleaned, deduplicated and analyzed. The VoYC Brief Youth Survey data underwent a five-step cleaning and deduplication process before determining the final number of surveyed youth who were categorized as experiencing homelessness. The steps to clean the data include:

- Exclude surveys in which the youth did not give consent;
- Exclude surveys in which the youth was under 13 or over 25 according to the provided date of birth;
- Exclude surveys in which the youth indicated that they had a stable place to stay; and
- Exclude surveys in which the youth indicated that they had already taken a survey.

VoYC Brief Youth Survey data was reviewed to identify and evaluate duplicate entries:

- Review the responses about date of birth and initials to identify possible duplicate entries.
- Next, look at the responses about race and gender identity for any possible duplicate entries. If all four categories match, this is likely a duplicate survey response that should be excluded from the data pool.
- If initials and date of birth match, but no other questions do, the data should be preserved in the sample.

Step Two: Analyze the Brief Youth Survey Data

Once the survey data is cleaned and deduplicated, determine what analysis should be done and how to best present the information, accounting for the intended audiences and purpose of the data collection. Multiple approaches may be necessary to respond to the full breadth of interest. Choices about data analysis and presentation should be driven by the way the information will be used. For example, if the youth count was held as part of the annual HUD PIT Count, a set of results will be prepared and reported according to HUD requirements. In other cases, the results may be used to educate the community about the scope and experiences of youth homelessness, which may require additional analyses to understand differences between age groups or the intersection between education and employment among the population. Analyses can be done to understand over-represented subpopulations of youth, such as young people who are pregnant or parenting. These young people may require special services or outreach to ensure that they are supported to make sustained exits from homelessness.

Part of analyzing the data includes engaging others to help interpret the results. In the VoYC process, the stakeholders who participated in planning and organizing the Youth Count reconvened to discuss the Youth Count experience and review the preliminary findings. This step is critical to contextualizing the results, understanding what and whom we might have missed, and identifying additional areas of analysis.

Communities may want to leverage other data to enhance their understanding of youth homelessness. For example, HMIS data can be used to identify youth who were receiving services but not surveyed. Additionally, communities may want to gather information from homeless service providers about the types of housing and supportive services available to young people. Pairing data from the youth count with data about the supply of services can help guide decision-making around the investment of resources.

Step Three: Share the Findings

After the hard work of engaging youth and the community to complete a youth count, you will have a valuable resource to make change for homeless youth in your community. Youth count data can be used in many ways. It can be shared strategically with a range of stakeholders to identify concrete steps to take to improve or expand services for homeless youth. It can be integrated with other important sources of data about homeless youth, such as the McKinney-Vento data collected by school districts, to create a fuller understanding about the size and needs of the local homeless youth population. These findings can be used to identify the need for services or increased collaboration among systems for subpopulations of youth, such as youth involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems.

When sharing the findings, remind the audience that youth count data reflects only one source of information about young people experiencing homelessness and housing instability and should not be taken as the conclusive number of homeless youth in your community.

By collecting better data and sharing it with an engaged set of stakeholders, youth counts can catalyze and grow your efforts to take effective action to prevent and end youth homelessness. ✤

Congratulations on completing a successful Youth Count!

Appendix of Tools

Phase One: Get Started

Step One: Establish the Leadership Team

- ☐ Potential Leadership Team and Stakeholder Team Members

Step Two: Convene the Initial Leadership Team Meeting

- ☐ Initial Leadership Team Meeting Annotated Agenda
- ☐ Overview of VoYC Youth Count Process
- ☐ Voices of Youth Count Brief Youth Survey
- ☐ Youth Count Timeline Planning Tool
- ☐ Potential Leadership Team and Stakeholder Team Members (Phase One, Step One)
- ☐ Focus Group Planning Worksheet

Phase Two: Plan and Hold Focus Groups

Step One: Convene the Focus Group Planning Meeting

- ☐ Focus Group Planning Meeting Invitation
- ☐ Focus Group Planning Worksheet (Phase One, Step Two)
- ☐ Focus Group Planning Meeting Annotated Agenda

Step Two: Recruit Focus Group Participants

- ☐ Focus Group Recruitment Language
- ☐ Youth Focus Group Recruitment Language
- ☐ Youth Focus Group Recruitment Flyer
- ☐ Focus Group Recruitment Plan Template

Step Three: Hold the Focus Groups

- ☐ Hot Spotting Worksheet
- ☐ Youth Focus Group Facilitation Protocol
- ☐ Provider Focus Group Facilitation Protocol

Phase Three: Prepare for the Count

Step One: Convene the Leadership Team Count Planning Meeting

- ☐ Leadership Team Count Planning Meeting Annotated Agenda
- ☐ Count Strategy Planning Worksheet

Step Two: Convene the Count Strategy Meeting

- ☐ Count Strategy Meeting Invitation

☐   Count Strategy Planning Worksheet (Phase Three, Step One)

☐   Count Strategy Meeting Annotated Agenda

Step Three: Recruit Guides and Volunteers

☐   Guide Recruitment Flyer

☐   Guide Recruitment Language

☐   Organizational Count Outreach Language

☐   Come and Be Counted Flyer

Step Four: Hold the Trainings

☐   Guide Training Presentation

☐   Guide Training Protocol

☐   Team Leader Training Presentation

☐   Team Leader Training Protocol

☐   Volunteer Training Presentation

☐   Volunteer Training Protocol

Phase Four: Conduct the Youth Count

Step One: Conduct the Street Count

☐   Street Count Deployment Log

☐   Street Count Deployment Guide

☐   Voices of Youth Count Brief Youth Survey (Phase One, Step Two)

☐   Voices of Youth Count Tally Sheet