Third annual homeless youth count begins across Massachusetts

The third annual homeless youth count begins Monday, which will see service providers and government agencies across the Commonwealth coordinating efforts to get an accurate reading on an often misunderstood population.

“There are at this point minimal resources focused on youth homelessness,” says Kelly Turley of Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, who helped coordinate this year’s youth count. While homeless youth—unaccompanied individuals 24 and younger—have specific needs and issues, they don’t always qualify for the same services available to older homeless individuals or for homeless families.

The main tool for the youth count will be a survey, available both online and in print in a variety of languages, that asks a variety of questions and offers a wide selection of answers. The lengthy survey aims to get a better understanding of homeless youth’s needs, as well as the population’s size.
“We know that their experiences are different. What drives them to homelessness is different,” says Turley. For example, among homeless youth there is a disproportionate amount of LGBTQ individuals, often fleeing or forced out of an intolerant and unsafe home. There are also many young people who find themselves on the streets after aging out of foster care. A better understanding of these situations could lead to inventive new approaches from both service providers and legislators.

It can be difficult to get an accurate figure on youth homelessness, partly because many young people don’t self-identify as such—after all, couch-surfing 20 year-olds might not consider themselves homeless, even if they meet all the parameters of the description. So instead of outright asking “are you homeless?”, the survey asks “Where did you stay last night?” and respondents can choose from 18 different answers.

“The word ‘homeless’ is not a word they connect to,” says Turley.

In addition to identification issues, homeless youth can be difficult to actually locate. They’re often wary of annual point in time census counts, and sometimes their numbers are lost within the general adult shelter population count. Incentives like gift cards will hopefully encourage youth to show up and take the surveys at places like Bridge Over Troubled Waters.

Last year, 1,964 young people took the survey, 31 percent (610) of whom said they experienced homelessness in the last year. The total statewide number of unaccompanied homeless youths is believed to be much higher. In 2013, there were 4,085 unaccompanied young people in the public high schools alone. Add in young adults and drop outs, and the number is certainly even higher.

The survey opens as the state budget talks are nearing a close. While advocates want to see $4 million of the state budget dedicated to youth resources, the current legislative budget only includes $2 million—which matches the amount of funding awarded last year. Last year’s survey helped advocates win that budget item, showing the need for state support of youth services.

The youth count itself is state funded. The Special Commission on Accompanied Homeless Youth and local Continuums of Care administer the survey. This year, the youth count will also collaborate with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and their study on youth homelessness.

If you’re a homeless youth and want to take they survey online, visit surveymonkey.com/r/massyouth.

Editor’s note: An earlier version of this article stated 2,000 homeless youths were believed to live in the state. The estimate is actually much higher, and number was changed to reflect that.

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