Canvassing and Mapping Strategies

Most count organizers combine a geography-based strategy with some service-based strategies for canvassing. Typically, only the largest metropolitan areas like New York City and Los Angeles use systematic sampling strategies. Youth counts often include canvassing of several types of service locations that may have a large number of youth who are homeless nearby. These locations or “hot spots” may include skate parks, 24-hour businesses, recreation centers, parks, and campsites. To prepare for the street count, work with your stakeholders to identify known locations where youth congregate.

Geography-based Strategy Guidance and Considerations

1. If a geography-based strategy is used, then decide whether to cover a CoC’s entire area, or just parts of it. If you choose partial coverage, identify which areas of the community to canvas (e.g., downtown only, downtown plus certain transportation corridors, etc.). To identify locations where youth who are homeless are known to congregate, consider using the following approaches:
   • Partner with your local Street Outreach Program so that they can help you identify locations where you may find youth who are homeless.
   • Consult with police officers, emergency medical technicians, and park officers.
   • Undertake walkabouts in advance of your count date to identify and confirm “hot spots.”
   • Ask youth where should consider canvassing for your count.
   • During the count, as youth that you survey to recruit their peers in similar situations to participate. This “snowball” sampling method is often used in research studies for reaching populations that may be hard to identify or locate.

2. Decide whether you will cover your chosen area entirely (e.g. by searching every block) or by using a sample.¹
   • If a sample will be used, consider whether to use a simple random sample or a stratification method that will include certainty blocks. (Virtually all communities that sample also select with certainty blocks that offer high odds of encountering people who are homeless).
   • After seeking input from informed stakeholders and youth, develop a map of known locations. This information will be used to determine the number of teams you will need for your street count.

¹ Retrieved on November 10, 2015 at: http://homelesshub.ca/toolkit/subchapter(note-sampling)
• Note that should you decide to fully cover an area (without sampling), this step may still be useful because it can help you identify areas that are unsafe and should be avoided and/or that require more volunteers because of a denser homeless population.
• If you will be canvassing and fully covering your downtown’s core, mapping known locations to cover the rest of the community is helpful. With mapping, a downtown zone can be divided into areas/zones that can be assigned to groups of volunteers to ensure count duplication does not occur. This is also a good way to ensure that an area can be easily walked by volunteers in short shifts.

3. Consider the types of places to search.²
- Count organizers must establish the instructions that will be given to volunteer searchers. For example:
  i. Should volunteers attempt to enter abandoned buildings, vacant lots, parks, and other outdoor spaces?
  ii. Should they count only the people they can see from the street, or look for people behind street objects like dumpsters?
  iii. Should they enter commercial establishments and approach customers?
- Some count organizers treat commercial establishments that are hot spots as part of their geographically based strategy and others treat them as service locations.

4. Count organizers need to consider how best to deploy volunteers.³ Several options exist:
- Designating Team Leaders to be responsible for a team of 2-3 volunteers and work together with volunteers to canvas zones and administer surveys.
- Or, selecting Area Captains who are individuals who are responsible for multiple zones and teams of volunteers.

5. Safety Considerations⁴
- Volunteers should never find themselves alone. A team should be within sight of one another at all times. It is the Team Leader’s responsibility to ensure that the team remains together. It is recommended that at the end of the count, all team volunteers should return to a designated area and sign out.
- Volunteer teams should have access to a cell phone and contact information for police and count organizers.
- Teams should be easily identifiable. In the evening and early morning hours, consider equipping volunteers with glow sticks and reflective tape. These methods serve a dual purpose by assisting homeless persons identify and approach the survey team once darkness falls. It also helps police easily identify count volunteers.
- Volunteers participating in indoor locations should wear a volunteer shirt or visible badge to ensure they are easily identified as count volunteers.

---
Service-based Strategy Considerations

Service-based enumeration (SBE) is a strategy that involves counting people at locations where they receive services. For a youth count, these locations may include youth service agencies, shelters, soup kitchens, and even businesses known to serve or accommodate people who are homeless. This approach may be used independently for a youth count or in conjunction with a geographic strategy.

An important consideration is whether to survey homeless youth or simply count them. Most organized youth counts use some form of a survey, either on the night of the count or during the days following it so as to obtain population characteristics. A survey should be used for Youth Count Texas!, in order to obtain information on the needs of youth who are homeless (in addition to the count).

When implementing a survey, consider the following:
1. Whether to survey all people encountered or sample—usually by using a random start and then taking every nth person. This would be applicable to many situations: shelter, a street area, soup kitchen line, or health clinic.
2. Whether to administer the survey at the same time as the unsheltered count, or later. If the survey will be administered at a later time, then identify how, where, and with whom the count and the survey will each occur.