

Point-in-Time Count

Toolkit module



Canadian
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Homelessness
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Youth Leadership

It can be hard to measure youth homelessness through a PiT Count. Youth are more likely to experience hidden homelessness and can be missed during unsheltered and sheltered counts. A PiT Count provides a snapshot of homelessness in a community, but it can't provide a complete picture of homelessness in any specific group. Engaging youth to help plan and implement your count will improve the quality of your data and give youth a chance to share their experiences, knowledge and expertise.

As part of the Point-in-Time Count Toolkit, this document provides guidance to Point-in-Time (PiT) Count coordinators and youth agencies on partnering to develop youth leadership councils or advisory teams as a key element as you plan and implement your PiT Count. We include a case study on The Youth Leadership Council, a youth leadership group instrumental in planning and implementing a youth magnet event as part of the 2016 St. John's Coordinated Count.

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This guidance was developed based on input from the Youth Leadership Council (YLC)¹, Choices for Youth² and End Homelessness St. John's³. It was authored in partnership with Sarah Brown, Youth Technical Advisor and former YLC member.

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¹The Youth Leadership Council (YLC) is an advocacy group that is youth-driven, youth-focused and youth-run. The purpose of the YLC is to break down barriers for youth through the lived experiences of others.

²Choices for Youth (CFY) is a non-profit, charitable organization that operates in the St. John's (NL) metro area. CFY provides programming and support services to homeless and vulnerable youth (aged 16-29) by focusing on five key life factors – housing, employment, education, mental/physical health and family stability.

³End Homelessness St. John's (EHSJ) is a community-led, 'collective impact' board that brings together all sectors to implement a plan to prevent and end homelessness in St. John's.

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Introduction

In the Point-in-Time Toolkit, we recommend that PiT Count organizers involve people with lived experience throughout the process of planning and implementing a count. Doing so improves data quality and ensures the count is effective, inclusive and respectful. Nearly all aspects of your methodology — including timing, survey design and volunteer training — will be improved by seeking feedback from people who have experienced homelessness.

Youth engagement should be a key element of your planning process. The causes, consequences and conditions of youth homelessness are distinct from adult homelessness. As a result, youth may have dramatically different perspectives than adults. These differences may affect, for example, where you choose to count, what you ask on your survey and even how you define homelessness.

You need planning and resources to engage youth. But if you take time to develop your strategy, youth involvement provides many benefits. Some communities may have resources in place, such as youth advisory groups, leadership councils, etc., and that's the place to start. However, if there are few existing resources, the PiT Count can open the door to a youth leadership group becoming established in your community.

How should I use this resource?

While there are many ways to engage youth— interviews, focus groups, informal consultation, and others – communities that use dedicated strategies to enumerate youth (such as magnet events and service counts, for example) will need to be sure they have enough youth actively involved to conduct these events effectively.

When planning begins, PiT Count coordinators should consult agencies delivering housing and homelessness services to youth (e.g., youth shelters, drop-in centres, transitional housing programs) to identify any existing youth leadership groups. Consult with such groups to learn if they would be willing to play a role in the count. Skip to [Defining Youth Roles in PiT Counts](#) for guidance on shaping youth participation during the count.

If there are no existing youth leadership groups in your community, consult local youth-serving agencies to gauge interest in developing one, either solely for the the count, or as a longer-term initiative, resources permitting. Refer to [A Case Study: The Youth Leadership Council, Choices For Youth](#) to learn more about forming a youth leadership group.

A Case Study: The Youth Leadership Council, Choices For Youth

There is no one right way to develop a youth leadership group in the homeless-serving sector. Youth-serving organizations across the country have incorporated the youth voice into program planning and community initiatives in a variety of ways.

One organization, Choices for Youth, a youth-serving organization in St. John's, Newfoundland, has successfully leveraged strengths and expertise of youth through a Youth Leadership Council. In this section, we provide a case study on that Youth Leadership Council (YLC), which played a key role in the St. John's 2016 PiT Count.

As you explore potential partnerships with youth-serving organizations in your community, consider using this case study as an engagement tool; there may be youth involved in your community's organizations who want to take the lead in planning and implementing aspects of the count. This initial leadership opportunity may evolve into a more formal youth leadership group once the count is complete.

What is the YLC?

The Youth Leadership Council is an advocacy group that is youth-driven, youth-focused and youth-run. The purpose of the YLC is to break down barriers for youth through the lived experiences of others. Youth are their own experts—it is important that we listen to and acknowledge their realities to help in the best way possible. – Sarah Brown, Youth Technical Advisor, former YLC member

The YLC is a group of young leaders affiliated with Choices for Youth. Members of the YLC bring a range of experiences, knowledge and skills to the council. With their combined expertise, the YLC informs policy, practice and service design at Choices for Youth, while simultaneously seeking opportunities in St. John's and communities across the country to influence how organizations and institutions, such as hospitals and schools, deliver services and supports to youth.

Key Lesson

An effective youth leadership group does more than inform and consult. Instead, it takes an active leadership role in an organization and community. This role is shaped by youth themselves.

How was the YLC formed?

Since its inception, Choices for Youth has been committed to seeking feedback from youth to develop or refine policies, programs and services. In 2011, the YLC, a more formal youth leadership structure, was established because of a need identified by youth themselves.

A small group of youth identified a number of barriers youth faced in the health care system. In response, Choices for Youth supported them to create a training workshop for healthcare professionals. The workshop was designed to educate healthcare staff about the perspectives of youth who face barriers such as homelessness, mental illness, substance use and bullying.

From that point onward, the YLC continued to grow organically. Additional youth, who were passionate about the work that the YLC had initiated, joined the council to be positive forces for change. The YLC began to meet weekly to set strategic priorities, formalize a leadership structure within the council, broaden its activities, and seek funding.

Today, the YLC has 12 members and its structure, membership and objectives continue to evolve, based on needs and objectives identified by members, their peers, and youth receiving services from Choices for Youth.

Key Lesson

Youth leadership groups will evolve overtime based on the goals and objectives identified by its members.

HOW DOES THE YLC TAKE LEADERSHIP?

**FEEDBACK ON
PROGRAMMING &
SERVICE DESIGN**

**COMMUNITY
TRAINING**

**PEER-TO-PEER
SUPPORT**

RESEARCH

ADVOCACY

EVENT PLANNING

**SPEAKING
ENGAGEMENTS**

**PARTICIPATION ON
EXPERT PANELS**

AND MORE...

As noted above, the YLC sets its own objectives and priorities based on the perceived needs of youth in their community. However, due to their expertise and knowledge, the YLC is also has asked by organizations and groups across the country to contribute to panels, events and symposia. Members of the council also participate in training and development opportunities to build skills, knowledge and experience in areas such as public speaking, first aid, facilitation and group management.

Key Lesson

The strength and capacity of youth should not be underestimated. With support, youth can make significant contributions to the homeless and youth-serving sectors. Their strengths and resilience should be celebrated and encouraged.

Major successes of the YLC include:

- ▶ Delivering training workshops to healthcare professionals, teachers, support workers and others on barriers such as homelessness, self-harm, stigma and bullying;
- ▶ Acting as coordinators for the Mental Health Commission of Canada's Anti-Stigma Campaign;
- ▶ Conducting peer-to-peer research with Choices for Youth clients about barriers to securing housing, education and employment; and
- ▶ Serving as youth representatives at events such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Summit, the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness Conference and the National Child and Youth Advocates Conference.

The YLC also contributed to the success of the St. John's 2016 PiT Count by:

- ▶ Providing feedback on the survey;
- ▶ Identifying locations where youth are likely to stay; and
- ▶ Planning, promoting and implementing a youth magnet event.

What elements are key to the YLC's success?

Although the structure, operations and objectives of a youth leadership group may vary, there are common elements that should be part of any youth leadership activity. The success of the YLC is founded on the following principles:

The YLC formed organically. It was not a program that was created by Choices for Youth, but by youth themselves. YLC members volunteer their time because they truly want to make a difference, and became involved in the YLC because of that passion. For some members, taking negative life experiences and turning them into something positive for others is healing.

The YLC is flexible. Some YLC members may face barriers such as mental illness, substance use, homelessness, and others. Some members may make commitments and be unable to follow through or may need time away from the council. The council recognizes and accommodates these realities.

The YLC receives adequate support. A staff member is assigned to the YLC to support the group and its individual members. Staff support is not overbearing; youth are empowered rather than managed.

Members of the YLC are protected. As lived experience advocates, youth may be vulnerable to exploitation by media, organizations, researchers, and others. The safety, reputation and health of youth leaders are protected at all times by Choices for Youth staff.

The YLC provides peer-to-peer support. A key role of the YLC is having members support one another based on shared experiences and goals. Privacy and confidentiality is upheld at all times.

Participation in the YLC is beneficial to its members. Through the YLC, youth are provided with training and development opportunities. While the primary goal of the YLC is to break down barriers and stigma affecting youth in the community, the council also allows its members to learn skills, build strengths, and experience fun and healing activities.

Where can I find more information about the YLC and Choices for Youth?

- ▶ YLC website
- ▶ YLC Facebook and Twitter
- ▶ Choices for Youth website
- ▶ Choices for Youth Facebook and Twitter

Defining Youth Roles in PiT Counts

There are many ways youth with lived experience can contribute to the count. Whether you're engaging an existing youth leadership group, forming a new group expressly to work on the count, or informally consulting youth throughout planning and implementation, we recommend the following strategies.

Consulting

- ▶ Consult with youth throughout planning, on key questions:
 - ▶ Where do youth experiencing homelessness tend to go in the community?
 - ▶ What services do youth access? When do they access them?
 - ▶ What are the causes and consequences of youth homelessness locally?
 - ▶ Would youth in the community attend a magnet event? What would encourage them to attend?
 - ▶ What other strategies would encourage youth participation in the count? How can the count be promoted among youth?
 - ▶ What would make youth reluctant to participate in the count? How can that be avoided?
 - ▶ Is the PiT Count survey accessible to youth? Will youth feel safe and comfortable answering the questions?
 - ▶ What should volunteer training include? What should people in the community know about youth homelessness?

Planning

Whether you are working with a newly created or an existing youth leadership group, consider delegating aspects of the count to the group and their host organization. Key planning tasks include:

- ▶ Planning a youth magnet event;
- ▶ Securing donations from local businesses;
- ▶ Spreading word of the count to other youth;
- ▶ Creating posters and promotional materials; and
- ▶ Creating social media campaigns about the purposes of the count.

Planning A Magnet Event?

Refer to [Youth Magnet Events](#) for a brief guide on planning and implementing youth magnet events.

Implementing

During the count, offer leadership or volunteer opportunities to youth. These could include:

- ▶ Training volunteers;
- ▶ Responding to media requests (with support from staff);
- ▶ Surveying youth in unsheltered and sheltered locations;
- ▶ Assisting the PiT Count coordinator at headquarters; and
- ▶ Coordinating a youth magnet event.

Reporting

Some additional roles that youth advisors or leadership groups can assume once the count is complete include:

- ▶ Assisting with data entry;
- ▶ Putting youth data into context;
- ▶ Providing quotes;
- ▶ Writing sections of the report;
- ▶ Designing infographics, reports and presentations; and
- ▶ Sharing the results with peers and youth-serving organizations.

General tips

These suggested roles are not an exhaustive list. Work with youth-serving organizations and their youth clients to determine how they might be interested in contributing to the count. As you shape your youth engagement strategy, remember:

Youth should benefit from participating in planning the count. Ask the youth advisors what types of skills, knowledge and experiences they would like to gain from the count. Look for ways to help them meet their personal goals.

Youth should be well supported. Partner with one or more youth-serving agencies to ensure youth are receiving support from trained staff while they are contributing their expertise to the count.

Youth should be compensated adequately, based on input from their host organizations. In some organizations, youth leadership groups take on projects on a volunteer basis. Other youth advisors are compensated. Consider the time and resource demands you are placing on youth involved in planning the count, and compensate youth fairly for their contributions. If youth are contributing more time and effort to a count than typical PiT Count volunteers, they should be financially compensated.

Youth should be recognized for their contributions. Consult with youth to determine how they would like to be recognized. Consider acknowledging the youth participants in your final report. If youth want to remain anonymous, respect their privacy.

Youth should work closely with the PiT Count coordinator. The PiT Count coordinator is ultimately responsible for the safety of volunteers, the quality of data collected and the outcome of the count. Youth and youth-serving organizations can play a key role in planning and implementation, but the PiT Count coordinator should remain actively involved in all aspects of the count, even youth-focused elements like magnet events.

For more information on conducting Youth Counts, refer to:

- ▶ [The Point-in-Time Count Toolkit](#)
- ▶ [Youth Readiness Assessment](#)
- ▶ [Youth Magnet Events](#)