# APPENDIX J

Summary of Challenges in Determining

the Number of Homeless Youth

Appendix J: Summary of Challenges in Determining the Number of Homeless Youth

There are a number of challenges to determining the number of youth that experience homelessness.  Below, we describe some of the critical factors that impact the wide variation in numbers provided across different sources.

1. Definition of Homeless Youth

The operating definition of homelessness varies across different sources.  The McKinney-Vento definition encompasses a variety of unstable housing situations including families that are doubled up with other families in addition to those counted as homeless under the HUD definition.  Point-in-Time counts tend to use a much more narrow definition provided by HUD.  HUD generally prioritizes funding to those that are in shelters, on the streets, or in places not meant for human habitation.  Counts often take a similar approach, only including those in these types of situations rather than those that are staying temporarily with others and excluding those in unstable housing situations.  Youth are particularly likely to stay with friends and acquaintances often referred to as  "couch surfing". To this end, excluding persons experiencing this type of housing situation may particularly influence an underrepresentation of youth counts.  In YCT!, youth were included if they were in doubled up situations, however, counts were conducted in conjunction with PIT counts in many cases which may have led to an emphasis on identifying those that meet traditional HUD priority funding definitions.

2. Variation in Time Frames

It is important to consider the time frames over which data is collected when comparing any numbers of youth that are identified as homeless.  In this report, TEA and DFPS numbers are cumulative over a school year or fiscal year.  PIT counts are intended to capture a snapshot at one point in time and will capture considerably fewer youth simply due to this time frame.  Across the literature, a variety of approaches have been taken so it is important to consider whether numbers reported reflect estimates over a given year or attempt to estimate how many youth are homeless at any given time.

3. Challenges in Finding and Identifying Homeless Youth[1]

There are some characteristics specific to youth that make them particularly challenging to count.  First, youth tend to not identify themselves as homeless.  Hence, both in schools and community counts, it is difficult to identify youth that meet the criteria of homelessness.  Strategies for counting that employ visual identification of people that fit a certain profile are also less likely to count youth since youth tend to go out of their way to not look homeless.  Youth are also at risk for victimization from others while on the streets which leads them to seek shelter earlier and not be visible on the streets at night, making them difficult to identify in primarily nightfall-based street counts.  Youth also report hesitancy in seeking services, particularly at adult shelters and service providers, due to feeling unsafe.[2] Youth under 18 often do not want to identify themselves and seek services due to fear of involvement with CPS or law enforcement.  Youth that are not visible on the streets or connected with services are extremely difficult to locate and include in counts of the number of youth that are homeless.

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[1] Santa Maria et al, 2015
[2] Ha et al, 2015