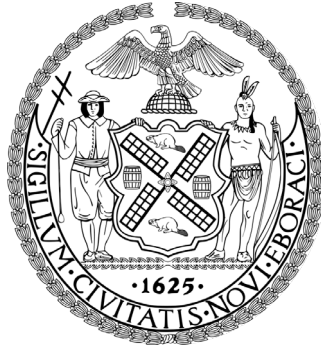


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**THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

BRIEFING PAPER OF THE HUMAN SERVICES DIVISION

Jeffrey Baker, *Legislative Director*  
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**COMMITTEE ON YOUTH SERVICES**  
Hon. Deborah Rose, Chair

April 13, 2021

**Oversight: Youth Count**

## INTRODUCTION

On April 13, 2021, the Committee on Youth Services, chaired by Council Member Deborah Rose, will conduct an oversight hearing on Youth Count—an annual supplemental count of unsheltered homeless youth aged 14 to 24 years—administered by the New York City Department of Youth & Community Development (“DCYD”). The hearing will explore the Youth Count’s methodology and ways to improve it to capture a more accurate estimate of unsheltered homeless youth in New York City (“NYC” or “the City”), as well as how Youth Count was adapted in the environment of the COVID-19 outbreak. Witnesses invited to testify include DYCD, youth advocates, program providers, advocacy groups and organizations, community members, and other interested stakeholders.

## BACKGROUND

Each year, the City conducts a point-in-time count of homeless adults, families, and youth based on the guidelines issued by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (“HUD”).<sup>1</sup> In 2013, HUD implemented a requirement to demarcate youth as a sub-population in homeless population estimates.<sup>2</sup> This differentiation serves to facilitate HUD’s work, in collaboration with the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (“USICH”), towards eradicating homelessness among this sub-group and to measure progress or regress in this area.<sup>3</sup> This point-in-time count is usually conducted over the last week of January-the first week of February and is composed of: 1) Homeless Outreach Population Estimate (“HOPE”) to count *unsheltered*

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<sup>1</sup> New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *Homeless Youth Count*, City of New York (2021), available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/cidi/projects/homeless-youth-count.page>.

<sup>2</sup> “Harmful Numbers - The 2017 ‘Baseline’ Count of Homeless Youth: Context, Risks and Recommendations.” NYC Association of Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Organizations & Coalition for Homeless Youth, 2016.

Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

individuals, 2) censuses of transitional housing and emergency shelters to count *sheltered* individuals and families, and 3) a supplemental Youth Count, administered by DYCD in partnership with the Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence, to identify *unsheltered* youth who were not captured in HOPE.<sup>4</sup>

HOPE is mandated by HUD and is a precondition for receiving funding under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, each year, the City dispatches thousands of volunteers<sup>6</sup>—over 2,500 in 2020<sup>7</sup>—to public spaces, such as streets, parks, and subway stations<sup>8</sup>—about 1,500 survey areas<sup>9</sup> (known as “high-density” spots based on past surveys and outreach workers’ observations), where unsheltered homeless individuals are physically counted.<sup>10</sup> This number is then coupled with an estimate of unsheltered homeless individuals in areas not surveyed (termed “low-density” spots) based on a random sampling in these locations.<sup>11</sup> Together, the count and the estimate constitute HOPE for five boroughs for a particular year.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> New York City Department of Youth and Community Development & New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *New York City Youth Count 2018: Estimating and Understanding Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth*, City of New York (2018), available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/cidi/downloads/pdfs/NYC-Youth-Count-Findings-2018.pdf>.

New York City Department of Youth and Community Development & New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *New York City Youth Count 2019: Estimating and Understanding Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth*, City of New York (March 6, 2020). Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> New York City Department of Homeless Services. *HOPE 2021*, City of New York (2021), available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dhs/outreach/hope.page>.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> New York City Department of Homeless Services. *HOPE 2020: NYC HOPE 2020 Results*, City of New York (2020), available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/hope-2020-results.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> New York City Department of Homeless Services. *HOPE 2021*, City of New York (2021), available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dhs/outreach/hope.page>.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> New York City Department of Homeless Services. *HOPE 2020: NYC HOPE 2020 Results*, City of New York (2020), available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/hope-2020-results.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

Additionally, pursuant to HUD and USICH’s mandate<sup>13</sup> and as part of an annual Youth Count, staff of participating programs, such as drop-in centers, community centers, public schools, and outreach teams, survey encountered youth aged 14 to 24 years<sup>14</sup>—an approach termed “service-based encounter model.”<sup>15</sup> A Youth Count survey is short, voluntary, and designed to collect demographic characteristics (i.e. age, race, gender, and sexual orientation) and information about a youth’s housing situation, such as where he/she spent the night of a point-in-time count, the number of places where he/she stayed over the month preceding the point-in-time count night, and the length of time he/she spent without a permanent residence.<sup>16</sup> Based on the responses, a youth is categorized as either *unsheltered* (per HUD’s definition of “literal homelessness” as residing in a

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<sup>13</sup> “Harmful Numbers - The 2017 ‘Baseline’ Count of Homeless Youth: Context, Risks and Recommendations.” NYC Association of Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Organizations & Coalition for Homeless Youth, 2016. Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> New York City Department of Youth and Community Development & New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *New York City Youth Count 2018: Estimating and Understanding Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth*, City of New York (2018), available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/cidi/downloads/pdfs/NYC-Youth-Count-Findings-2018.pdf>.

New York City Department of Youth and Community Development & New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *New York City Youth Count 2019: Estimating and Understanding Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth*, City of New York (March 6, 2020). Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> “Harmful Numbers - The 2017 ‘Baseline’ Count of Homeless Youth: Context, Risks and Recommendations.” NYC Association of Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Organizations & Coalition for Homeless Youth, 2016. Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> New York City Department of Youth and Community Development & New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *New York City Youth Count 2018: Estimating and Understanding Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth*, City of New York (2018), available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/cidi/downloads/pdfs/NYC-Youth-Count-Findings-2018.pdf>.

New York City Department of Youth and Community Development & New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *New York City Youth Count 2019: Estimating and Understanding Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth*, City of New York (March 6, 2020). Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

place not meant for human habitation, such as the streets or a car<sup>17</sup>), *unstably housed* (for example, “couch surfing” in a friend’s or a relative’s apartment or living in a shelter) or *presumed stably housed* (for instance, living in a parent’s or a relative’s apartment or in one’s own apartment).<sup>18</sup> The resultant number of *unsheltered* youths serves to supplement HOPE for that year by identifying *unsheltered* youths who were not counted during HOPE.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, in 2019—the most recent year for which data are available, the Youth Count was conducted from Tuesday, January 29<sup>th</sup> to Friday, February 1<sup>st</sup>, with youth being asked where they spent the night of Monday, January 28<sup>th</sup>.<sup>20</sup> 1,332 youths responded to the survey.<sup>21</sup> As a result, 34 youths were categorized as *unsheltered* (a decrease from 36 unsheltered homeless youths identified in the 2018 Youth Count<sup>22</sup>): 17 spent the point-in-time count night on a “subway/train/ferry/bus;” 10 were on the “streets/walked around/in a park;” 4 stayed in an “abandoned building/stairwell/lobby/yard/car/squat;” 1 was in “other private place not meant for sleeping;” 1

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<sup>17</sup> The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. *Children and Youth and HUD’s Homeless Definition*, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2021), available at <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/HUDs-Homeless-Definition-as-it-Relates-to-Children-and-Youth.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> New York City Department of Youth and Community Development & New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *New York City Youth Count 2018: Estimating and Understanding Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth*, City of New York (2018), available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/cidi/downloads/pdfs/NYC-Youth-Count-Findings-2018.pdf>.

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<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> New York City Department of Youth and Community Development & New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *New York City Youth Count 2019: Estimating and Understanding Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth*, City of New York (March 6, 2020). Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> New York City Department of Youth and Community Development & New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *New York City Youth Count 2018: Estimating and Understanding Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth*, City of New York (2018), available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/cidi/downloads/pdfs/NYC-Youth-Count-Findings-2018.pdf>.

spent the night in a “fast food restaurant/24-hour store/bank/Internet café;” and 1 was at a “bar/club/other party.”<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, 416 youths were categorized as *unstably housed* (an increase from 323 unstably housed youths identified in the 2018 Youth Count<sup>24</sup>): 159 youths spent the point-in-time count night in a “shelter/drop-in center/transitional living/church;” 80 were in a “parent’s apartment;” 60 stayed at a “friend’s place;” 58 were in “other relative’s apartment;” and the rest were in some other temporary arrangement (“own apartment/room/dorm” (19), “boyfriend/girlfriend’s place” (17), “hotel/motel” (16), “other” (4), “working” (3), “hospital/mental health facility” (2), “jail/juvenile detention/prison” (1), and “group home (residential foster care)” (1)).<sup>25</sup>

Overall, the 2019 Youth Count in combination with the 2019 HOPE identified 170 unsheltered homeless youths<sup>26</sup>—a decrease from 220 unsheltered youths identified in the 2018 citywide point-in-time count.<sup>27</sup>

However, homeless-youth services providers and advocates argue that these numbers stand in stark contrast to hundreds of unsheltered homeless youths they encounter in the course of

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<sup>23</sup> New York City Department of Youth and Community Development & New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *New York City Youth Count 2019: Estimating and Understanding Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth*, City of New York (March 6, 2020). Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> New York City Department of Youth and Community Development & New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *New York City Youth Count 2018: Estimating and Understanding Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth*, City of New York (2018), available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/cidi/downloads/pdfs/NYC-Youth-Count-Findings-2018.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> New York City Department of Youth and Community Development & New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *New York City Youth Count 2019: Estimating and Understanding Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth*, City of New York (March 6, 2020). Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> New York City Department of Youth and Community Development & New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. *New York City Youth Count 2018: Estimating and Understanding Characteristics of Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth*, City of New York (2018), available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/cidi/downloads/pdfs/NYC-Youth-Count-Findings-2018.pdf>.

services provision and outreach work and attribute what they describe as a systematic undercounting to Youth Count being under-resourced and methodologically weak.<sup>28</sup>

In particular, advocates and providers contend that DYCD dedicates insufficient time, staff, and resources to Youth Count and falls short of providing adequate, youth homelessness-specific training.<sup>29</sup> For instance, advocates and providers assert that DYCD consistently fails to plan for a Youth Count in a timely manner.<sup>30</sup> As another example, critics claim that DYCD should, but neglects to incentivize a much greater youth participation in a count, as both surveyors and respondents, through free MetroCards, food, or financial stipends.<sup>31</sup> As yet another instance, according to advocates and providers, in spite of evidence indicating that participation of youth with lived experiences of homelessness is essential to an effective count, DYCD's efforts to include such youth in the design, planning, and implementation of Youth Count are woefully inadequate and described as "tokenist."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "Harmful Numbers - The 2017 'Baseline' Count of Homeless Youth: Context, Risks and Recommendations." NYC Association of Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Organizations & Coalition for Homeless Youth, 2016. Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

The New York City Continuum of Care Youth Action Board. Letter to Susan Haskell, Deputy Commissioner of Youth Services, New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, Regarding 2021 New York City Youth Count, Dated January 27, 2020. Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> The New York City Continuum of Care Youth Action Board. Letter to Susan Haskell, Deputy Commissioner of Youth Services, New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, Regarding 2021 New York City Youth Count, Dated January 27, 2020. Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> "Harmful Numbers - The 2017 'Baseline' Count of Homeless Youth: Context, Risks and Recommendations." NYC Association of Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Organizations & Coalition for Homeless Youth, 2016. Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> The New York City Continuum of Care Youth Action Board. Letter to Susan Haskell, Deputy Commissioner of Youth Services, New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, Regarding 2021 New York City Youth Count, Dated January 27, 2020. Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021; "Harmful Numbers - The 2017 'Baseline' Count of Homeless Youth: Context, Risks and Recommendations." NYC Association of Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Organizations & Coalition for Homeless Youth, 2016.

Further, advocates and providers highlight certain methodological weaknesses plaguing the Youth Count. For example, the service-based encounter approach relies on surveying youth engaged with participating programs’ services, which is problematic, because homeless youths tend to have difficulties accessing and negotiating resources and are likely to deliberately stay hidden as a survival strategy as a result of their negative experiences with law enforcement and other formal institutions, their disproportionately high rates of trauma, their extreme vulnerability to violence, and their tendency to experience the stigma of homelessness more acutely than adults.<sup>33</sup> As another instance, Youth Count (and HOPE) surveyors are not permitted to canvass such areas as abandoned buildings, stairwells, lobbies, 24-hour retail and fast-food establishments, and hospital emergency rooms despite the fact that a point-in-time count is normally conducted on one of the coldest nights of the year—37 degrees on the night of the 2018 count (January 22<sup>nd</sup>) and 28 degrees on the night of the 2019 count (January 28<sup>th</sup>)<sup>34</sup>—when homeless youths are likely to seek shelter from cold in such locations.<sup>35</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Given the important role that Youth Count numbers play in decisions regarding the amount of funding allocated to the needs of an especially vulnerable population—unsheltered homeless youth and the resultant necessity to ensure that such numbers are correct, at today’s hearing, the Committee on Youth Services will examine the Youth Count’s methodology and ways to improve

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Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> New York City Department of Homeless Services. *HOPE 2020: NYC HOPE 2020 Results*, City of New York (2020), available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/hope-2020-results.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> “Harmful Numbers - The 2017 ‘Baseline’ Count of Homeless Youth: Context, Risks and Recommendations.” NYC Association of Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Organizations & Coalition for Homeless Youth, 2016. Forwarded to the Youth Services Committee staff by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, Jamie Powlovich, in an email dated January 29, 2021.



it to capture a more accurate estimate of unsheltered homeless youth in NYC, as well as how Youth Count was adapted in the environment of the COVID-19 outbreak.