

BERGEN

Bergen County sweeps Garden State Plaza, Bergen Community College for homeless youth data

Svetlana Shkolnikova NorthJersey

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Homelessness among young people tends to be invisible.

They don't go to homeless shelters as adults tend to. They don't seek out help or services or, in some cases, even consider themselves homeless.

They instead jump from one friend's couch to another or take shelter in more unusual locations: shopping malls, classrooms, parked cars.

Their transience makes them notoriously difficult to track, but for the first time, Bergen County is going to the places where homeless young people are more likely to be found.

As part of the county's annual Point-in-Time count of the homeless, volunteers on Tuesday night fanned out across Westfield Garden State Plaza and Bergen Community College specifically to find homeless adults between the ages of 18 and 24.

The unique survey, described by Bergen County's Department of Human Services as the first of its kind in the state, was initiated by a task force created by the county last year to end youth homelessness.

"We're looking to be more creative and more realistic about how we're doing outreach that specializes with this population," said Julia Orlando, chairwoman of the task force and director of the Bergen County Housing, Health and Human Services Center. "We're interested in the unsheltered population right now because we have no idea what that number looks like. They're elusive to us."

That number on Tuesday night was zero.

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Volunteers holding flashlights and carrying bags with toiletries and clothing started the count at 9 p.m. at Garden State Plaza and finished at 1:30 a.m. at Bergen Community College. They walked through classrooms, drove around parking lots and looked under the college's stairwells, where Cynthia Rivera, a public safety officer at the school, found a homeless veteran last week.

The college struggled with bouts of homelessness among its students about a decade ago, Rivera said, but rarely sees homeless students now. Stafford Barton, a counselor at Bergen Community College who sits on the homeless youth task force, said he works with a number of students who face housing insecurity but knows of only a few students who have no homes.

“As a general rule, when you talk about community college, you're often talking about the most vulnerable students in the education community,” said Larry Hlavenka, a spokesman for the school. “You have students that are homeless and still coming to school, and that's one of the many challenges that a community college faces.”

Bergen Community College has built up its efforts to support the homeless in recent years, offering more counseling, helping with bill payments and rent and partnering with the Center for Food Action pantry, Hlavenka said.

Kenneth Ehrenberg, chief of police in Paramus, said there have been no reports of homeless young people taking shelter at Garden State Plaza, but police tagged along to this year's youth survey to make sure they were not missing anything.

“Anything's possible,” Ehrenberg said. “Am I going to say there are no homeless juveniles? No, I'm never going to say that, because you don't know what you don't know.”

Paramus last dealt with significant youth homelessness about 25 years ago, when a group of young people squatted at the abandoned Alexander's department store at the intersection of Routes 4 and 17, he said. The site is now home to IKEA.

Orlando said a youth council made up of homeless and formerly homeless youths suggested that the task force sweep malls and colleges to get a better understanding of the homeless population. Bergen County intends to conduct sweeps every few months or so, breaking from the annual Point-in-Time surveys mandated by the federal government.

“For every day that a young adult is homeless, there’s a 2 percent greater chance they’ll return to homelessness after they’re housed,” Orlando said. “Getting them out of homelessness as soon as possible is a priority.”

The Bergen County Housing, Health and Human Services Center in Hackensack is currently housing five to 10 young adults in its 90-bed temporary shelter.

Many young people who come seeking help have been asked to leave their homes due to mental illness or substance abuse, Orlando said. Some are kicked out of their homes because of their sexual orientation, and others leave on their own because of abusive parents.

It can be harder to provide services to young people because of their age, said Mary Sunden, executive director of the Christ Church Community Development Corporation, a partner of the shelter. Most young adults want the freedom to move around and are reluctant to accept the kind of permanent housing typically offered to homeless adults.

“The biggest problem for us is you worry about them being in the shelter because they’re young,” Orlando said. “A lot of times they come and leave and it’s hard to keep them here long enough for us to do what we need to do so when they’re here. We need to work really, really fast.”

Last year’s Point-in-Time count in Bergen County found 354 people experiencing homelessness, 33 of them youths. The data include a census of both unsheltered people and people in sheltering programs on the night of the count.

Nationwide, one in 10 young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 endures some form of homelessness in a year, according to a 2017 national survey. Half of that number reflects people who couch-surf only.

Communities across New Jersey are trying a variety of methods to gather accurate data on youth homelessness, said Jay Everett, an associate at Monarch Housing Associates, the coordinator of the statewide Point-in-Time count. Some counties ask additional questions while conducting the count; others target specific locations.

“The fact of the matter is that the evidence in some of our data shows that there is an increasing issue of tenuously housed or homeless youth, but in some cases the data is difficult to gather accurately,” Everett said. “Getting a better handle on information is critical for discerning where and what help can be provided.”

Bergen County's youth survey is not necessarily unique but is on the cutting edge of methodologies being used to reach a tough-to-reach population, he said.

The county decided to target youth homelessness last year after eradicating chronic homelessness and homelessness among veterans, Orlando said.

"After those successes, if you're a good community, you then say, 'What's our next priority population going to be?' " she said. "This task force really demonstrates the commitment of the county in its effort to end all homelessness."

Email: shkolnikova@northjersey.com