What we learnt about process – undertaking a Pan-London Youth Census

Introduction

- The findings presented in this report further our understanding of the prevalence and complexity of young people's rough sleeping in London. However, they are based on data from just three boroughs: Bromley, Camden and Lambeth.

- To explore the extent to which our findings hold true across the capital, a pan-London census must be undertaken.

- Our experience of undertaking the pilot has generated a series of learnings that can be used to inform the design of census administered across the capital. In this section of the report, we present learnings in two categories. The first set of learnings will help us to **maximise the number of young people reached by the pan-London census**. The second will help us **ensure the data collected is of high quality.**

Maximising engagement with the census

The importance of non-outreach channels for reaching young people

"We can't find people we're missing using the same processes we already know we're missing them with."

- The census pilot aimed to reach as many young people with recent experience of rough sleeping as possible. Importantly, this included those not usually found by traditional outreach activities.

- Whilst some of the variation between the number of young people reached by the boroughs (see slide 14) may be a consequence of differing levels of rough sleeping, it is likely that some of the difference can be accounted for by differing levels of success in reaching young people through channels other than outreach.

- In one borough, where the least surveys were completed, only the LA-commissioned outreach team was heavily engaged. This meant that no young people were found through any other route than a standard outreach shift.

- In contrast, in another borough surveys were completed by several organisations, which may explain why more young people were included in the census data who were not recorded on CHAIN*.

- If a pan-London census is to generate accurate data on rough sleeping across the capital, it is important that:

  1. **Outreach teams can adapt their regular activities** to increase the likelihood of finding young people sleeping rough.

  2. Surveys are submitted by teams/organisations that are in contact with young people in **ways other than traditional outreach**.

*Two of the eleven young people we expected to find on CHAIN whose information wasn't in the database were from this borough.

Maximising engagement with the census

Adapting outreach activities during census week

- In contrast to the Women's Census, which states that all participating boroughs should undertake at least one additional 'gender-informed' outreach shift during the week, the Young People's Rough Sleeping Census pilot was less specific in its approach.

- Boroughs were asked to tailor shifts where possible to ensure locations where young people were known to be were covered*, but there was no requirement to put extra resources into outreach work during census week.

- In practice, due to capacity constraints and a lack of knowledge as to where young people might be (most outreach workers are not specialists in young people), only small changes were made to outreach shifts during the week in all boroughs. Outreach workers continued to prioritise Street Link referrals and completed the survey with any young people they came across. They also ensured they visited locations young people had previously been found, making use of historic data records for this purpose.

"We're not missing them on purpose. If we knew where they were, we'd be there."

DEPAUL
Homelessness has no place

Maximising engagement with the census

Adapting outreach activities during census week: Recommendations

For the pan-London census, we would recommend:

- Considering mirroring the Women's Census by including a requirement that outreach teams undertake at least one (or more) additional shift that is designed to reach young people not usually found by standard outreach activities.

- Drawing on the intelligence of experts and our pilot's findings to more clearly define what 'young person-informed' means in general and within each borough.

- Making it a requirement of outreach teams that they visit locations young people have previously been found in the borough (making use of CHAIN data/internal records).

DEPAUL
Homelessness has no place

Maximising engagement with the census

The Census Coordinator role

It was clear from the pilot that the Census Coordinator role is critical. Coordinators need to be motivated and engaged in the census and have sufficient capacity to dedicate to the project.

Choosing the right roles to act to as coordinators

- In two boroughs, one person held the Census Coordinator role. Both of these coordinators were from the boroughs' Rough Sleeping Teams. In another borough, the role was shared between the Rough Sleeping Coordinator and a Strategic Commissioning Manager. All coordinators in the pilot felt sharing the role – especially between people from different teams - was preferable because:

    - It reduced the capacity burden on individuals

    - It allowed the project to benefit from individuals' complimentary knowledge/existing relationships (e.g. because of their different roles, the coordinators had existing relationships with different organisations that they were able to engage with the census).

- As Census Coordinator, knowledge of the local area - in particular, youth services - is critical. All our coordinators felt that it would have been easier to engage youth services if someone with a youth-specific role were involved. The coordinators in one borough suggested, for example, that the Commissioner for Youth and Play would have been a good addition to the team.

- It was also suggested that the coordination of the census could sit outside the local authority, perhaps with a well-connected youth service. Coordinators felt that someone without a local authority connection may have more success with engaging with relevant services (particularly grassroots/those not commissioned by the local authority).

Maximising engagement with the census

The Census Coordinator role

Whilst all coordinators were enthusiastic about the project and fully supportive, there was some initial hesitancy about being involved. This largely stemmed from concerns about what would be involved – in particular, how much time in would take.

A clear role description

- The role of the Census Coordinator was fairly loosely defined for the pilot, largely because we knew we would be working differently in each of the boroughs in order to explore what might work best for a pan-London census. However, coordinators felt that the uncertainty about what would be involved made it difficult to estimate the time that would be needed and, therefore, whether or not they would have capacity to do the role justice.

- The element of the role coordinators felt was most time-consuming was ongoing communication with organisations, both to engage them with the project initially (which often took multiple phone calls and emails) and to motivate them in the lead up to census week. Chasing organisations to complete surveys with young people during census week was particularly time-consuming for coordinators.

"In hindsight I should have blocked out at least a couple of hours every day that week."

Maximising engagement with the census

The Census Coordinator role: Recommendations

For the pan-London census, we would recommend:

- Assembling Census Teams to lead the coordination of the census within boroughs. Team members should have complimentary knowledge/relationships across youth services/rough sleeping.

- Considering whether coordination for the census has to sit within the local authority and, if not, whether this needs to be consistent between boroughs.

- Creating a much clearer role description for Census Coordinators so they are more able to accurately estimate the time that will be involved.

- Consider whether it would be possible to supplement capacity for coordinators to engage local services with administrative support organised centrally.

DEPAUL
Homelessness has no place

Maximising engagement with the census

Engaging the right organisations

"The organisations that submitted surveys were engaged, but I think we missed some important ones."

- In all the pilot boroughs, coordinators felt there were organisations that they had not managed to engage that have access to young people sleeping rough in the borough. There were four main types of organisations discussed in planning meetings:

- **Outreach:** All boroughs successfully engaged their own outreach teams. However, in many London boroughs there is outreach work being done outside of these teams – often by voluntary, grassroots organisations. Given the nature of the census, it's important that these organisations are engaged.

- **Youth services, including grassroots:** Whilst the largest youth organisations in the boroughs were involved in the pilot, there are many smaller, grassroots organisations that were not. It was suggested that a pyramid approach might work well, where larger youth services are enlisted to engage smaller ones through their networks.

- **Other non-youth specific services:** This includes all-night restaurants, libraries, health services and the transport system. Because of the short lead-in time, little was done in the pilot to engage these organisations. They may, however, be an important connection to young people meeting the criteria for completing the survey.

- **Colleges and universities:** Due to perceived red tape, there was no attempt to engage educational establishments in the census pilot. However, with more lead time this might be possible and should be considered for the pan-London census.

DEPAUL
Homelessness has no place

Maximising engagement with the census

Engaging the right organisations: Recommendations

For the pan-London census, we would recommend:

- Considering keeping a central database of relevant services to ensure important players are not missed and reduce the burden on coordinators (who were responsible for compiling the list in the pilot).
- Enlisting the support of larger youth services in each borough to engage smaller, grassroots services from their networks.
- Making a clear decision regarding whether schools and colleges should be involved in the census.
- Ensuring there is a clear strategy for engaging organisations.

DEPAUL

Homelessness has no place

Maximising engagement with the census

Motivating teams/services to be involved

"How can we make it more attractive to be involved? Especially for youth organisations"

- In two boroughs, the census was delivered by a core group of organisations that were involved at the planning stage. Because of limited capacity for the project, engaging additional services proved challenging.

- In the other borough, in addition to this core group, a list of other relevant organisations was compiled, and attempt was made to engage them with the project – largely via email. Only two (from a list of over 50) responded positively and submitted questionnaires.

- Coordinators felt this lack of engagement was likely due to three main factors:

  1. The lack of an existing relationship with smaller organisations. Contacting busy organisations cold was considered unlikely to be successful, especially where there was no named contact.

  2. A perceived distrust for local authorities amongst grassroots organisations.

  3. The lack of lead time, which meant multiple attempts to contact/drip-feeding information was not possible.

- One of the coordinators suggested that the involvement of young people themselves – or someone with personal experience of rough sleeping as a young person – would likely have most success at engaging youth services to participate.

DEPAUL
Homelessness has no place

Maximising engagement with the census

Engaging the right organisations: Recommendations

To increase engagement for the pan-London census, we would recommend:

- Being clearer on the aims of the research and what will happen as a result of services' participation. Most importantly, services will be interested in how the census will benefit young people.

- Finding the right person to speak to within organisations, preferably someone senior who can help to motivate staff.

- Making the requirements of organisations – and the staff teams within them - really clear.

- Finding a way to build a personal relationship with organisations (with coordinators or the research team). Putting a face to a name helps, even if it's just an invitation to a launch webinar. A 'launch event' could involve guest speakers who could talk about the importance of gathering accurate data on young people's rough sleeping.

- Increasing lead time, i.e. getting in touch sooner, so organisations have more time to engage with and plan for the census.

DEPAUL

Homelessness has no place

Ensuring data is of high quality

Consistency of survey administration – staff training

- Following recommendations from organisations involved in the planning meetings, it was decided that staff would be trained to undertake the census survey with young people via a combination of written guidance and an accompanying video.

- The rationale for this was that a video could be used flexibly by busy teams, whereas they might be put off by the requirement to attend in-person or online training.

- We produced a short, succinct, easy to digest video that was accessible via the Census Hub. Full written guidance was also available alongside the other materials that organisations would need to complete the survey with young people (e.g. the privacy notice and survey translations).

- We have limited information regarding the uptake of our guidance. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that our materials went largely unseen by a considerable proportion of those conducting the survey with young people. This has safety implications – as the guidance includes important information about *how* the survey should be carried out with young people – as well as implications for data quality.

- Coordinators, and the services we spoke to, felt we had gone too far in reducing the burden of training and should, perhaps, offer something more involved. Delivery of sub-regional training sessions, either on or offline, was recommended as it could also serve as an opportunity for networking for the organisations involved.

- Increasing lead time was also seen as key here, as people didn't have enough time to process the materials ahead of census week.

Ensuring data is of high quality

Improving the questionnaire

- Our analysis of the pilot data, and direct experience of carrying out the surveys with young people, revealed some issues with data quality that could be improved with some changes to the questionnaire:

  1. **Possible removal of questions relating to journeys into homelessness:** For some young people the first and most recent times they slept rough were different. Asking questions about different episodes of rough sleeping in the same questionnaire seemed confusing for some young people, especially non-English speakers.

  2. **Reducing survey length:** Data from MS Forms suggests that the questionnaires took a lot longer than the estimated 10-15 mins to complete (up to 50 mins). Removal of the above questions would shorten the questionnaire substantially.

  3. **Simplify gender questions:** Two gender questions were asked in the questionnaire. The first asked young people whether their gender was different or had more components to the one assumed at birth. The second asked young people to pick the gender(s) they identified with from a list. The data suggests that the first of these questions was not well understood, either by young people, or by the staff that were completing surveys with young people*. For the pan-London census, simplifying these questions should be considered.

*16 respondents said their gender had different components to the one assigned at birth, which is far more than we would expect.

Ensuring data is of high quality

Improving the questionnaire

4. **Review categories to ensure they're mutually exclusive:** On analysing the data, we found that some of it was difficult to interpret because of a lack of clarity around responses. For example, it was clear that the categories of 'eviction' and 'asked to leave' were being used inconsistently. In the final questionnaire for the pan-London census, categories should be reviewed to ensure they are mutually exclusive where one response is required. Cognitive testing to ensure questions are fully and consistently understood would also be advisable.

5. **Make better use of filtering to ensure that answers make logical sense:** There were cases in the pilot data where the combination of responses by the same respondent did not make logical sense. For example, there were three people who said they had slept rough every night in the three months before the census but that the last night they had done so was more than a week ago. If it is possible with the software that is used, this issue could be corrected by using more sophisticated filtering in the questionnaire (e.g. masking responses to questions that are not relevant).

6. **Improve process for translating surveys:** Many of the young people engaged with the census pilot spoke languages other than English. Whilst translations were available in Romanian, Tigrinya and Arabic, these were only in paper, not online. As such, language was a significant barrier to engagement and had implications for data quality. For the pan-London census, an improved process for survey translation should be established.

Improving data quality

Training and questionnaire: Recommendations

To improve data quality for the pan-London census, we would recommend:

- Reviewing the approach to training and introducing something more involved than written guidance or videos (e.g. sub-regional training sessions/networking opportunities)
- Reducing questionnaire length, perhaps by removing the questions about journeys into homelessness
- Simplifying the gender questions
- Reviewing responses to single-choice questions to ensure they're mutually exclusive and well-defined.
- Making better use of survey filtering to ensure responses make logical sense.
- Improving the process for survey translation.

DEPAUL
Homelessness has no place