

On the Front-Line: Understanding Philadelphia's Homeless Populations Through the Point in Time Count

Each year on a cold January night, hundreds move through the streets of Philadelphia on a quiet mission. They support the Point in Time (PIT) Count, an annual effort to count the sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons in America's cities. Teams of volunteers set out in different "zones" to survey homeless individuals and connect them with resources. The data gathered provides insight on the extent of homelessness and ways to improve related services.

More than 250 volunteers participated in the January 26th Philly Counts event, including four from Jefferson's College of Population Health. Dr. Amy Leader, faculty member, and MPH students Madeline Brooks, Cordelia Elaiho, and Karla Geisse worked in part of Suburban Station from 4-7 a.m., where they conducted surveys and distributed care packages.

Madeline's Experience

The PIT Count opened my eyes to the simultaneous visibility and concealment of Philadelphia's homeless population. One need only walk down Market St. or Broad St. to pass several homeless individuals, yet here in Suburban Station at 4 a.m. were more than 100 people, congregated on benches or sleeping in secluded corners, who would dissipate with the morning commuter crowd. During the daytime no one would ever know about this station's "hidden" population.

The PIT Count took place on my 24th birthday. While interviewing individuals I encountered a man only three months younger than me. He revealed that he had previously been in and out of the foster care system. I reflected on the chain of events that brought me to Philadelphia for

graduate school while this man had to take shelter in a subway station. Little separated us except for different circumstances – a deeply humbling realization.

That morning I also spoke with two individuals told me about the ways in which 'the system' had failed them. One woman angrily described outreach work as "passing the buck," while another man claimed that politicians would never care about the homeless. While I knew that the data gathered from the PIT Count would help Philadelphia to alleviate its burden of homelessness, that meant little to those who already felt forgotten. Participating in the PIT Count reaffirmed my belief in the value of a population health perspective. We can address homelessness only by combining personal care with knowledge of the social and economic factors that allow it to continue. I'm proud to have been part of these efforts.

Cordelia's Experience

One hundred twenty-one: that was the number of homeless people we counted at Suburban Station the morning of January 26th, 2017. Some were awake, discussing life and other events. Many were sleeping, trying to catch a few hours of rest. When I signed up for Philly Counts I did not know what to expect. I did not expect to interview everyone with whom we came in contact, and on a relatively warm January night, I was not expecting so many people in the station. There was the added caveat that our newly elected President, Donald Trump, was in Philadelphia for the Republican Retreat and I was unsure if his presence would cause the relocation of the homeless. I have never participated in a Point in Time count before and I was grateful for the

training provided by Project HOME and the leadership of Dr. Leader. For a few early morning hours, our team witnessed and shared in the experience of a diverse mix of people who were homeless and seemingly hopeless.

The most memorable conversation I had was with a young lady who seemed to have no support. She discussed how she felt so alone. She participated in last-resort measures in order to make it through the month. It was almost unbearable to hear her story. I wanted to sit with her and parse through how she got to be in this position and what her plans were going forward. It is easy to tell someone to work hard and push through. It is also easy to give advice and make suggestions, but many times, people just want a listening ear. They want to know that they matter as humans, not just as a project. This young lady wanted to know that I understood some of the hardships she was experiencing.

The Philly PIT Count was incredibly shocking and moving. The number of homeless people at Suburban station was just a fraction of those without a home all over Philadelphia. It was a memorable night. I hope I was able to portray the compassion and care necessary.

Karla's Experience

As a population health student, I hear and read many statistics related to Philadelphia's challenging issues, including the amount of homelessness within the city. This does not really prepare you for the sight of a subway station that is filled with sleeping individuals surrounded by the belongings they can carry at four in the morning. As a part of the PIT event, our group surveyed and counted the homeless population in Suburban

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

station beginning at four in the morning and ending around seven for a total of around 121 in Suburban Station during that time interval.

One particular conversation stood out for me with a woman I'll call "T". T had been homeless off and on for around a year, suffering from multiple mental and physical problems, coming from a broken home with unsupported veterans. However, she had a certain grace, dignity and pride, which I found exceptionally admirable. She spoke eloquently and was proud of her family's contributions to the nation. She also had much more energy than I did during the morning hours.

The experience was very eye-opening, especially as I commute through Suburban Station every morning when I come to campus. I had no idea of the extent of the migration in and out of these stations every morning, and I was told that they are typically more crowded during this time of year (not being so because of the warmer weather conditions). I was also very much surprised about the amount of resources available – there was a "hub" within Suburban Station itself, handing out beverages and providing resources for shelter and medical care.

It was very heartening to see the amount of passion for this cause. Especially at four in the morning.

Madeline Brooks

Madeline.Brooks@Jefferson.edu

Cordelia Elaiho

Cordelia.Elaiho@Jefferson.edu

Karla Geisse

Karla.Geisse@Jefferson.edu

The authors are students in the MPH program at JCPH.