

What Works

Need to Know

Guerrilla marketing surveys power Urban Peak

By Josh Rolnick

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what works

Strategies, Approaches, Developments

MARKET RESEARCH

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Jamie Van Leeuwen sees strength in numbers.

Van Leeuwen is the associate executive director of Urban Peak, a center for homeless youth based in Denver. He works with drug addicts, many of whom he meets on Denver's 16th Street Mall, trying to help them get off the streets, sober, and into apartments of their own. But lately, he has also been traveling the country, presenting at conferences in cities like Austin, Texas, Washington, D.C., and Phoenix, speaking on a topic that for him has become mantra. As he put it recently at a gathering of social sector researchers in Denver, "How do we use research to inform us?"

For Van Leeuwen, who wrote his master's thesis on the "gutter punks" of New Orleans, and who is now completing his Ph.D. in public affairs with a focus on housing and youth policy at the University of Colorado at Denver, this is not simply idle academic speculation.

Van Leeuwen believes that when nonprofits conduct even the most basic, cost-efficient research on the populations they serve, thereby gaining a better understanding of those they are trying to help, it generates more community interest and funding and allows nonprofits to offer more strategic programming.

He, of all people, ought to know.

What Are They Using?

Urban Peak, founded in 1987, is the only licensed homeless and runaway youth shelter in Colorado, with affiliates in Denver and Colorado Springs. The nonprofit, which has a 40-bed shelter and more than 100 units of housing for formerly homeless youth, serves people between the ages of 15 and 24, offering everything from GED classes to a medical clinic to mental health and drug and alcohol treatment. Street outreach teams, including the formerly homeless, walk the streets seven days a week, looking to make contact with homeless kids, offering free condoms, bleach kits, and dental dams.

In 2001, Urban Peak had a problem. Officials knew roughly how many homeless were living on the streets: A



Urban Peak's 40-bed youth shelter in Denver. The organization made a breakthrough by surveying homeless youth to assess their needs.

1997 count by the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative and the state of Colorado found 197 youth sleeping on the Denver streets; a 2001 survey counted nearly 400. The data established what Urban Peak already knew – youth homelessness was a serious problem in Denver. Urban Peak officials also knew anecdotally that drug abuse was a serious issue, but they had no concrete information about the specifics. What were kids using, and how frequently were they using it? Without knowing this, Van Leeuwen says, they couldn't devise strategic programs to address the problem.

"If your entire population is using alcohol," Van Leeuwen says, "it doesn't make sense to design treatment programs to help heroin-addicted kids."

"There was very little research to tell us anything about the population," he

adds. "The challenge was, we couldn't go to the mayor and say: 'We've got a population with a substance abuse issue. It's a serious problem.' Because then the first question is: 'What are they using? And how much?'"

"If your entire population is using alcohol, it doesn't make sense to design treatment programs to help heroin-addicted kids."



Van Leeuwen's solution was to ask street kids directly about their drug use. He solicited input from homeless kids, so he could be sure to ask the right questions. He was told, for instance, that if he was going to ask whether teens were abusing the cat tranquilizer ketamine, he should refer to it by its street name – Special K. He was advised that he had left a whole category of drugs – “Fry, Amps, and Wets,” street terms for embalming fluid – off the list. With this input, he drafted a two-page “point-in-time” survey.

On March 15, 2001, between 8 a.m. and midnight,

Urban Peak outreach teams combed the streets of Denver, surveying as many homeless and runaway youth as they could find. They handed out McDonald's gift certificates, whether kids participated or not. “Because of the rapport that the Urban Peak outreach team has established with the youth on the streets,” concludes a report on the survey, written by Van Leeuwen and five co-authors for the June 2004 issue of the *Journal of Community Health*, “there were no subjects that declined the survey.”

Staff then entered the results into a Microsoft Access database. The whole survey cost roughly \$500.

But the findings were powerful. Of 186 youth surveyed, 19 percent said they had used heroin in the previous nine months; 29 percent had used methamphetamine. The youth also detailed their use of ketamine, crack/cocaine, hallucinogens, ecstasy, and marijuana. Eleven percent reported trading sex for drugs, money, food, or shelter.

For the first time, the Denver community had a snapshot of the depths of the problem. On August 13, 2001, a *Denver Post* article, headlined “Homeless Youths Report Drug Abuse, ‘Survival Sex,’” reported on the findings, noting “drug and alcohol abuse among Denver street youth is rampant, and more than one out of 10 who took part in a survey had engaged in survival sex.” A follow-up point-in-time survey a year later confirmed a trend: 20 percent of the 215 youth surveyed said they had used heroin and methamphetamine in the previous 30 days.

The data allowed Van Leeuwen to make the case that Denver had a growing need for comprehensive substance abuse screening, assessment, and treatment services. Specifically, he noted, there were no Colorado service providers helping young heroin addicts get clean. He presented the

data to City Councilwoman Elbra Wedgeworth, who called a meeting with officials from the local hospital, the mayor's office, and state officials. Wedgeworth used the data to argue that Denver needed more targeted programming.

With Wedgeworth as an advocate, the City Council eventually approved a \$70,000 grant to Urban Peak to begin addressing the problem. Addiction Research Treatment Services, a substance abuse treatment program of the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center that was working with Urban Peak, leveraged the grant to

secure \$1.5 million from the federal Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration. This helped Urban Peak secure a \$500,000 grant from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In March 2003, using the city and federal funding, Urban Peak opened a new program called STAR, or Starting Treatment and Recovery. The program, based on a University of Alabama program for cocaine addicts, takes homeless kids who are shooting heroin or other “hard” drugs, and moves them quickly into an apartment. While undergoing treatment for their addictions, they are given two or three random drug tests a week; as soon as they fail one test, they lose their keys. For a participant to get an apartment

back, two tests must come back clean.

“We want to show them what they can have if they stay sober,” Van Leeuwen explained. “If they don't stay sober, they lose it.”

Since STAR's inception, about 30 kids have successfully completed the program, kicked their drug habits, and moved off the streets.

Van Leeuwen, meanwhile, says it was the concrete survey data that identified the scope of the problem, opened up the funding streams, and led ultimately to programmatic success. When he travels the country these days, he advises his audiences to start down the same road by asking a simple question: “What is something your agency would like to know that would help you better serve your population?”

“You don't need a team of researchers,” he says. “Sometimes, there are basic questions we can answer through surveys. The fundamental piece is: What do you need to know?” □

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