

Houston/Harris County/ Fort Bend County Point-in-Time Enumeration 2011 Executive Summary



COALITION
FOR THE
HOMELESS
Leading Houston Home

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Overview

A point-in-time (PIT) count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons in the Houston, Harris County, and Fort Bend County areas was conducted from 3 to 10 p.m. on January 31, 2011. The purpose of the count was to determine the number of homeless persons. *Homeless persons* are defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as 1) those staying in emergency shelter, transitional housing, or safe havens with beds dedicated for homeless persons or 2) those persons who are unsheltered (i.e., staying in a place not meant for human habitation). The PIT Count is a federal requirement for all communities receiving funding from HUD. A needs assessment will take place during March and April to determine the number of persons in the homeless sub-populations as defined by HUD (e.g., military veterans, unaccompanied children, chronically homeless individuals, and families) and to estimate the resources needed to reduce the number of people who are homeless. However, the PIT count gives a good assessment of the extent of the problem in the region.

The PIT count was organized and led by the Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County (the Coalition for the Homeless) in consultation with The University of Texas School of Public Health and the Houston Department of Health and Human Services. Many homeless services providers, as well as community volunteers, including homeless and formerly homeless persons, participated.

The 2011 count enumerated individuals staying in 94 shelters, emergency, and transitional housing on the night of January 31 based on reports received from the providers. Unsheltered homeless individuals (those sleeping on the streets or in places not meant for human habitation) were counted using two methods. Surface teams (one driver, one service provider, one homeless or formerly homeless person, and one community volunteer) drove the streets of the enumeration area, observing and counting homeless individuals. Teams left from one of nine staging areas, each of which was divided into smaller sectors. The number of teams assigned to each sector was based on prevalence of unsheltered homeless persons in previous counts. The surface teams counted unsheltered homeless persons found on street corners, parks, parking lots, convenience stores, and other areas where they congregate.

Areas where homeless persons were likely to be found but that are not visible from the street were canvassed by Outreach Specialist Teams composed of homeless service providers familiar with the areas through their professional work. These teams walked under bridges, along the bayous, and through other areas where encampments of homeless persons had been identified. They also investigated abandoned buildings where homeless persons may be residing. Care was taken not to double count homeless individuals.

Changes from 2010 to 2011 in PIT Count Methodology

Several significant changes were made in the methodology of the 2011 count to improve the completeness and accuracy of the enumeration. The first was the involvement of traditional homeless services providers under the umbrella of the Coalition for the Homeless along with academia (University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston School of Public Health) and local health departments (Houston Department of Health and Human Services (HDHHS) and Fort Bend County Department of Health and Human Services). This collaboration was exemplified by the implementation of an Incident Command System (ICS), a standardized management tool used in fire, police, and public health preparedness activities ensuring integration of efforts through its defined organizational structure. ICS has many advantages, including an orderly, systematic planning process and clear chains of command and supervision. Command Central was set up at HDHHS.

Other improvements in this year's count included use of nine staging areas, an increase of three over the six staging areas used in 2010. The additional staging areas reduced travel time needed by teams to get into the field and thus increased their time actually counting the homeless. We also increased the number of counts that took place by one and thus had two practice counts (January 18 and January 24) before the actual count on January 31. This allowed Staging Area Captains and Co-Captains as well as the Surface and Outreach Specialist teams to become familiar with their duties and the geographic areas that they were to cover.

This year's count included increased enumeration activity in the Fort Bend area to better characterize homelessness in that county. Efforts in the past to count Fort Bend homeless individuals have not been optimized and so the extent of the problem has not been well defined. By increasing the number of teams and adding a staging area in the county, we were able to get a better picture of homelessness in that area.

Improvements also were made to the composition and function of teams that counted the unsheltered homeless. Volunteer teams included homeless and formerly homeless individuals who could guide teams to locations where the homeless are likely to be found. The use of Outreach Specialist Teams to canvass areas not readily seen by driving surface teams resulted in fewer unsheltered homeless remaining undetected. On the night of the count, "SWAT" teams were formed with HDHHS personnel. These teams were sent out to sectors that needed additional assistance identifying and counting homeless persons, thus increasing coverage of all areas.

The methodology of the sheltered count also was enhanced. This was accomplished in two ways. First, a greater effort was made to identify and inventory all emergency shelters in the area, whether or not they were officially part of the Coalition for the Homeless. Second, shelters that use the housing inventory chart were encouraged to return that form for the night of the PIT and follow-up calls were made to ensure they were received. For 2010, 75% of the emergency shelter projects and 69% of the transitional housing projects reported the number of persons

sheltered on the night of the PIT. This year, due to this increased effort, 100% of the projects reported their point-in-time numbers. As a result, the number of shelter, safe haven, and transitional projects participating increased from a total of 74 to 94.

Key Findings 2011 PIT Count

Data collected show a total of 8,538 sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals (per HUD's definition) in the Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County region on the night of January 31, 2011 (Figure 1). Of these, 512 (6.0%) were counted in Fort Bend County. Of the total number of homeless persons, 4418 (51.7%) were unsheltered. According to the 2010 census, the combined population of Harris and Fort Bend counties was 2,677,834. This puts the percent of homeless persons within these two counties at 0.3% or 1 out of every 300 residents.

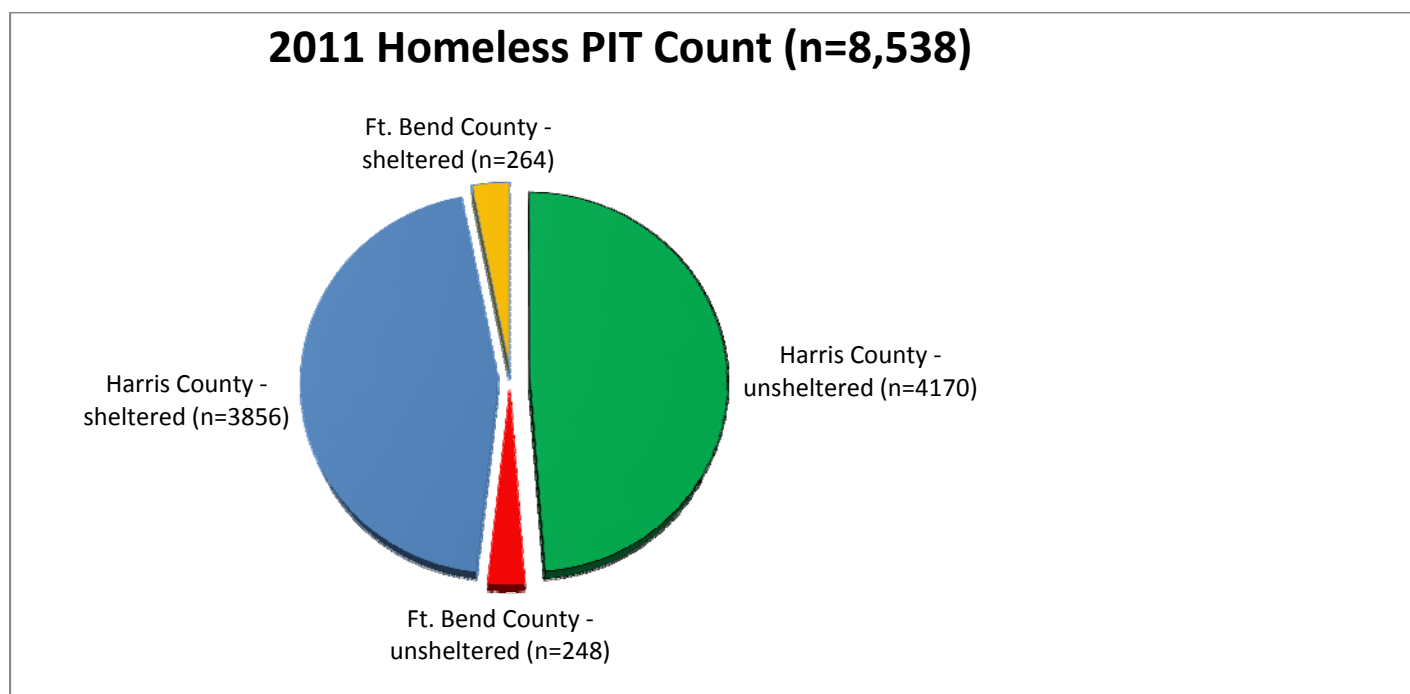


Figure 1

Comparison between 2011 and 2010 PIT Counts

The 2011 PIT count of 8,538 sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons showed a 25.2% increase in homeless individuals counted compared to the 2010 PIT count finding of 6,819 sheltered and unsheltered homeless. In 2010, 2,103 homeless persons (30.8% of the total

homeless population) were found on the streets or in places not meant for human habitation compared to 4,418 (51.7%) in 2011. A comparison of the number of homeless as a percentage of the area's population shows 0.2% in 2010 vs. 0.3% in 2011. Findings from the last four counts are shown in Figure 2. These findings must be viewed in light of different PIT techniques used each year and so it is not possible to say whether the actual number of homeless persons has varied or if fluctuating counts are an artifact of differing methodologies. Implementation of the standardized methodology used this year will permit year-to-year comparisons in the future.

The enhancements to the methodology for the 2011 Point-in-Time for the sheltered and unsheltered count improved the completeness and accuracy of the enumeration. Point-in-Time sheltered and unsheltered numbers for previous years (2007, 2009, and 2010) were extrapolated following HUD guidelines. For 2011, no extrapolation methods were used because there was a 100% participation rate for the sheltered count, and all enumeration areas were canvassed for the unsheltered count.

Comparison of PIT Counts 2007-2011

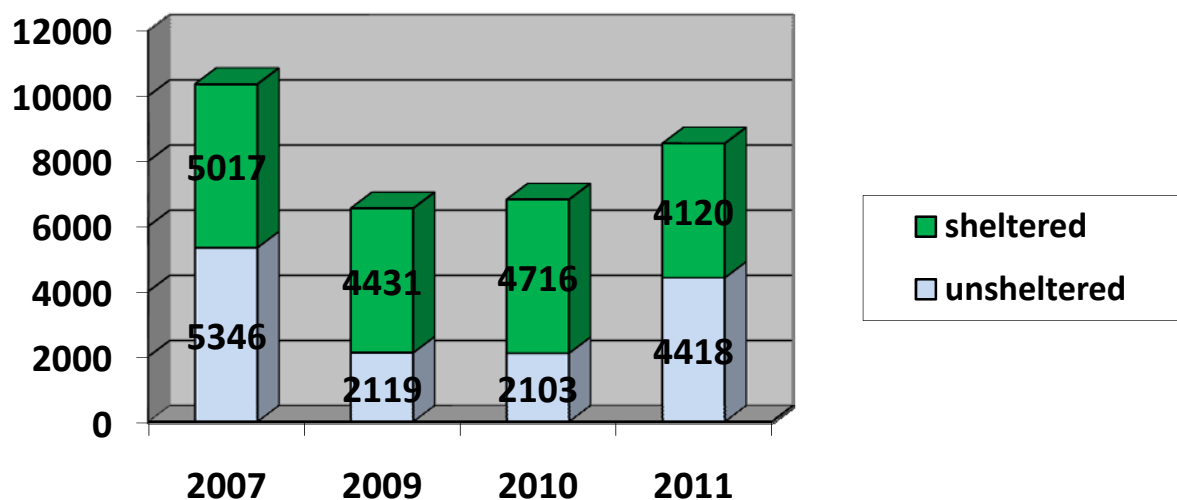


Figure 2

Homelessness in Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend Counties

HUD's rules and regulations dictate the definition of *homeless* that was used for the count, and these figures will be reported to them. However, a more complete picture of homelessness in the region can be obtained by widening the definition of *homeless* to include individuals in the Harris County jail the night of the count who indicated that they were homeless before arrest (and so likely to be so after release) and those who would be homeless were it not for the assistance of vouchers for permanent supportive housing or rapid rehousing. When these numbers are added to the 2011 PIT Count, the total number of homeless persons in the region is 13,852, with the largest percentage unsheltered (31.9%), followed by sheltered (29.7%), and then those in Harris County Jail (18.9%). Using this expanded definition of homelessness, we find that 0.5 percent (or 1 out of every 200 residents) of the Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County population is homeless.

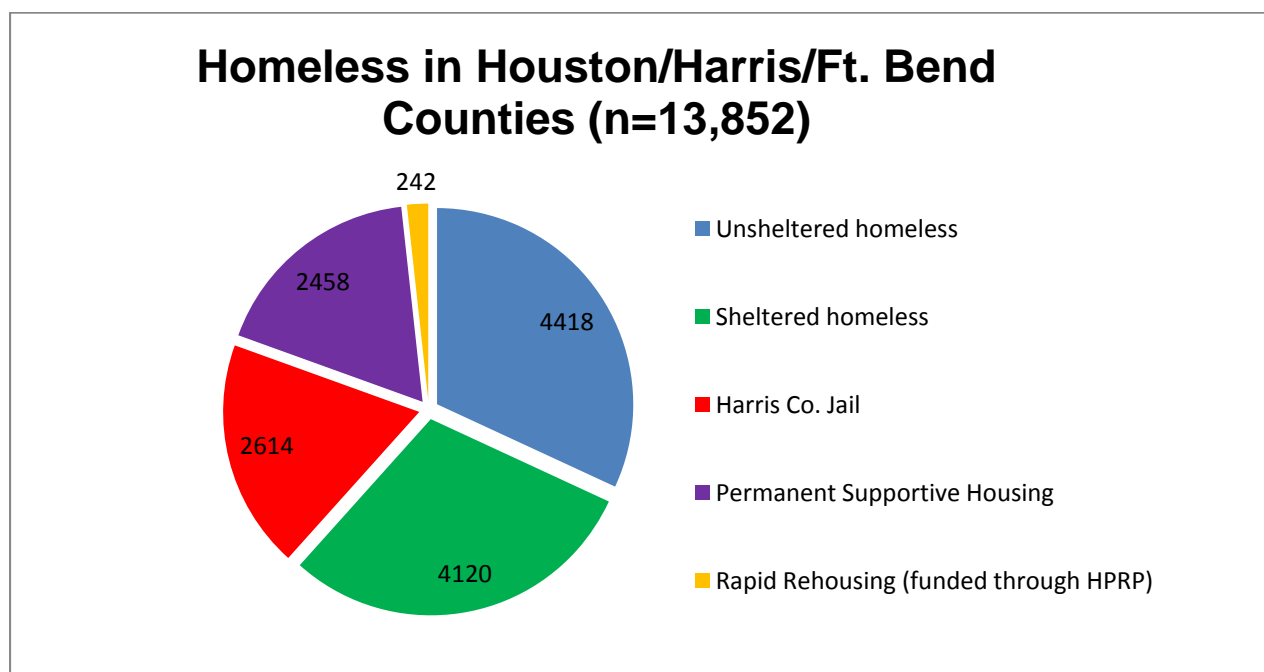


Figure 3

Summary and Conclusions

New methodology was designed to increase the completeness and accuracy of the Point-in-Time count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals in the Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County region. The enumeration was held on the night of January 31, 2011. 4,418 unsheltered homeless individuals (staying in a place not meant for human habitation)

were counted while 4,120 people were staying in shelters or transitional housing that evening. Most of these individuals were found in Harris County (94%).

The 2011 PIT count represents a 25.2% increase over the number of homeless individuals counted during January 2010. However, the impact of enhanced methodology in increasing these numbers cannot be separated from a true increase in the number of homeless persons. The 2012 count, performed with the same methodology, will provide some insight into this question. A needs assessment will take place during March and April 2011 to characterize the homeless population and estimate the resources needed to reduce the number of people who experience homelessness.

The 2011 Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County Point-in-Time Enumeration

Addendum

Homeless Children

It is important to note that other definitions and measurements of homelessness are used in addition to the enumeration. Consider for example, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act of 2001 which expands the definition for homeless children and youth. The Education Assistance Act includes children and youth who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement.

The majority of homeless children and youth are not covered by the current HUD definition of homelessness because the HUD definition excludes people staying with others temporarily because they have nowhere else to go (“doubled-up”), and people staying in motels due to lack of adequate alternatives. These are very common living situations for families with children as well as unaccompanied youth.

Pursuant to the Homeless Education Assistance Act, every school district is required to have a homeless education liaison who performs specific tasks, including identifying youth under the expanded definition. The Coalition received reports from homeless liaisons for the school districts within the Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County area. Accordingly, an estimated total of 10,933 homeless youth have been identified so far in the 2010-2011 school year. This number is cumulative throughout the entire school year and includes those children living in shelters as reported in the enumeration on the PIT Count.