Executive Summary

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**Overview**

A point-in-time (PIT) count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons in the Houston, Harris County, and Ft. Bend County areas was conducted from 3 to 11 pm on 31 January 2012. The purpose of the count was to determine the number of homeless persons [defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as those staying in emergency shelter, transitional housing, or safe haven with beds dedicated for homeless persons or 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 the spring months 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 in consultation with The University of Texas School of Public Health and the Houston Department of Health and Human Services. Many homeless services providers participated as well as community volunteers, including homeless and formerly homeless persons.

The 2012 count enumerated individuals staying in a total of 77 shelters including emergency shelters (n=17), transitional housing units (n=59), and one safe haven on the night of 31 January based on reports received from the providers. Unsheltered homeless individuals (those sleeping on the streets or in places not meant for 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. The number of teams assigned to each sector was based on the prevalence of unsheltered homeless 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 comprised of homeless service providers familiar with the areas through their professional work. These teams walked under bridges, along the bayous and other areas where encampments of homeless 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 and 2012 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 and these were implemented in the 2012 count as well. 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 a local health department [Houston Department of Health and Human Services (HDHHS)]. This collaboration was exemplified by included the implementation of an Incident Command System, 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 the 2011 and 2012 counts 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 available to count the homeless. One practice count took place on January 24th before the actual count on January 31st. 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 which they were to cover.

Enumeration activity included the Ft. Bend area to better characterize homelessness in that county. Efforts in the past to count Ft. 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 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 teams driving by 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. Secondly, 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. For the 2011 and 2012 counts, due to this increased effort, 100% of entities defined by HUD as housing the sheltered homeless for the purposes of the Point-in-Time count (n=77) reported their numbers.
Key Findings 2012 PIT Count

Data collected show a total of 7,356 sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals (per HUD’s definition) in the Houston/Harris County/Ft. Bend region on the night of 31 January 2012 (Figure 1). Of these, 283 (3.8%) were counted in Ft. Bend county. Of the total number of homeless, 3824 (52%) were unsheltered and almost one in twenty-five (268 or 3.6%) were age 18 years or younger. The combined population of Harris and Ft. Bend counties, according to the 2010 census, was 4,677,834. This puts the percent of homeless within these two counties at 0.16% or 1 out of every 636 residents.

Areas of Harris/Ft. Bend counties where 8 or more persons were observed during the Point in Time Count (“hotspots”) are shown in Figure 2. While many of these areas are in downtown Houston and the Third and Fifth Ward, there was one hotspot in Ft. Bend County and several north of Houston along Beltway 8.

Figure 1
Comparison between 2012 and 2011 PIT Counts

Findings from the last five counts are shown in Figure 3. 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 has varied or if fluctuating counts are an artifact of differing methodologies. However, comparisons can be made between the 2011 and 2012 counts as a standardized methodology was used both years and will continue to be used, permitting more year-to-year comparisons in the future.

The 2012 PIT count of 7,356 sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons showed a 13.8% decrease in homeless individuals counted compared to the 2011 PIT count finding of 8,538 sheltered and unsheltered homeless. In 2011, 4481 of those (41% of the total homeless) were found on the streets or in places not meant for habitation compared to 3824 (52%) in 2012.
Homelessness in Houston/Harris County/Ft. 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 homeless 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 2012 PIT Count (Figure 4), the total number of homeless in the region is 11,848 with the largest percentage unsheltered (32.3%) followed by those in shelters or transitional housing (29.8%) and those in permanent supportive housing or Rapid Rehousing (funded through the Homeless Prevention and Rapid-Rehousing Program; 24.5%). Using this expanded definition of homelessness, we find that 0.25 percent (or 1 out of every 400) of the Houston/Harris County/Ft. Bend County population is homeless.
A comparison was made between this expanded definition of homelessness between 2011 and 2012, when similar methodologies for the Count were employed. In 2011, 13,852 individuals were deemed to be homeless using the expanded definition. The 2012 finding of 11,848 represents a 14.5% decrease in the total number of those experiencing homelessness, a similar decrease to that found when assessing using only the HUD definition of homelessness.

![Figure 4](image)

**Homeless in Houston/Harris/Ft. Bend Counties (n=11,848)**

- Unsheltered homeless: 3,532
- Sheltered homeless: 2,902
- Harris Co. Jail: 1,412
- Permanent Supportive Housing: 3824
- Rapid Rehousing (funded through HPRP): 1,78

**Characteristics of Those Experiencing Homelessness**

HUD requires that certain subpopulations of the homeless including veterans, chronically homeless individuals, and chronically homeless families be documented. While this information can be easily captured by the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) for those in shelters, the observational count of the unsheltered does not allow for this. Therefore, surveys to determine these subpopulations were administered the morning following the PIT Count to 180 clients at agencies feeding the homeless to provide an estimation of the percent of these subpopulations. Only those who were unsheltered the previous night were included in the survey.

HUD’s definition of chronic homeless is four or more episodes of homelessness within the past three years or one or more current consecutive years of homelessness. In addition, the individual must have a disabling condition which makes daily activities difficult (e.g., medical, psychological, substance abuse). A chronically homeless family meets the above definition with at least one child under the age of 18 years living with his/her parent(s).
Among those experiencing homeless who were unsheltered on the night of January 31, 2012, 22% were US Veterans. Over one in three (34.4%) met the HUD definition of chronic homeless individuals while only one out of hundred (1.1%) of the unsheltered that night were chronically homeless families. The approximate age of individuals observed the night of the count was recorded and 168 of the 3,824 (one in 25) of the unsheltered homeless were judged to be under the age of 18 (4%). Of these youth, 189 (70.5%) were male.

Among those in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or safe haven on the night of the PIT count, one in four (25.7%) was classified as a chronically homeless individual while 1% were chronically homeless families. The percentage of veterans among the sheltered was lower than among the unsheltered (13.3%). Additional data obtained on those staying in shelters that night show that 12.9% had severe mental illness, 21.4% had were chronic substance abusers, 4% had been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, and 19.1% were victims of domestic violence. There were 21 (0.5%) unaccompanied children under the age of 18 sleeping in the shelters.

**Summary and Conclusions**

New methodology designed in 2011 to increase the completeness and accuracy of the Point-in-Time count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals in the Houston/Harris County/Ft. Bend County region was implemented again in 2012. The enumeration was held on the night of 31 January. A total of 7,356 persons experiencing homeless were counted with 3824 (52%) unsheltered homeless individuals (staying in a place not meant for human habitation) and 3532 (48%) staying in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or safe haven that evening. Most of these individuals were found in Harris County (96.2%).

The 2012 PIT count represents a 13.8% decrease in the number of homeless individuals counted compared to the number counted in January 2011 and a 14.5% decrease using an expanded definition of homeless. The use of similar methodologies should have eliminated artificial variations due to differences in how we counted the homeless in 2011 and 2012. However, while these numbers are encouraging and may point to evidence that the number of those experiencing homelessness is being addressed and reduced, it should be realized that due to time and the geographic area that needs to be covered, the counts are approximate and many factors can affect the accuracy of the count, including weather. The 2013 count, performed with the same methodology, will provide additional evidence regarding the trend. A needs assessment is taking place during March through May to characterize the homeless and to estimate the resources needed to reduce the number of people who experience homeless.
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 12,512 homeless youth have been identified so far in the 2011-2012 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. This is out of a total of 947,617 total student enrollments, making up 1.3% of the total student enrollment (or one out of every 76 children). The equivalent number reported during the 2010-2011 school year was 10,933 and so there was a 14.4% increase in the number of homeless children reported in Harris and Fort Bend Counties.

Of the school children found to be homeless:
--2,706 were in shelters (21.6%)
--8,647 were doubled up (69.11%)
--608 were unsheltered (4.86%)
--551 were in hotels/motels (4.4%)

In addition, there were 299 unaccompanied youth (i.e., not living with parents or guardian). This represents 2.39% of the total homeless student enrollment. This is a cumulative number of those enrolled in the schools and does not differentiate between those who are sheltered versus unsheltered.