Houston/Harris County/
Fort Bend County
Point-in-Time Enumeration
2013

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 29 January 2013. 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. Although, due to the size of the geographic area that is covered by the count, we know that not all persons experiencing homelessness can be identified in a single night, 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 2013 count enumerated individuals staying in a total of 65 shelters including emergency shelters \( n=16 \), transitional housing units \( n=48 \), and one safe haven on the night of 29 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. Teams left from one of ten staging areas, each of which was divided into smaller sectors. 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 2013 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 and enhanced in the 2012 and 2013 counts 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 including 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 2013 included use of ten staging areas, an increase of four over the six staging areas used in 2010 and one over the nine used in 2011 and 2012. 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 22nd before the actual count on January 29th. 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 Houston/Harris County Continuum of Care. 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 2011-2013 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=65) reported their numbers. Over 94% of sheltered numbers came from HMIS, meeting the HUD requirement of >75%.
The 2013 PIT Count included a concerted effort to enumerate emancipated youth ages 24 and younger who have not been optimally counted in previous years entitled YouthCount! (See section below). This was done by sending volunteer teams to places where youth were known to congregate and administering a short survey to collect basic demographic information as well as length and reasons for homelessness. Places canvassed included Ft. Bend Women’s Center, HAY Center, Star of Hope, Salvation Army Social Services, Covenant House, Open Gate Bering UMC Youth Advocates, Kinder Emergency Shelter, Houston Area Women’s Center, and Montrose Grace Place.

2013 PIT Count Key Findings

Data collected show a total of 6,359 sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals (per HUD’s definition) in the Houston/Harris County/Ft. Bend region on the night of 29 January 2013 (Figure 1). Of these, 103 (0.4%) were counted in Ft. Bend county. Of the total number of homeless, 2978 (47%) were unsheltered and approximately one in six (1027 or 16%) were under age 18 years. 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 0.14% or 1 out of every 735 residents.
Comparison between 2013 and 2011-2012 PIT Counts

Findings from the last three years’ counts are shown in Figure 2. These counts have used a standardized methodology and so valid comparisons can be made between the years. However, it is important to emphasize that limitations of the PIT count make it impossible to count every unsheltered person experiencing homelessness, and factors on the night of the count including weather may affect results.

The 2013 PIT count of 6,359 homeless persons showed a decrease of 2,179 persons from that found in 2011. This corresponds to a 14% decrease in homeless individuals counted compared to the 2012 PIT count and a 26% decrease compared to the 2011 count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless. The decrease seen is encouraging and while the exact magnitude cannot be determined, the level of the decrease does provide evidence that there are fewer persons experiencing homelessness in the Houston/Harris County/Ft. Bend County area.

In 2013, 2978 of those (47% of the total homeless) were found on the streets or in places not meant for habitation compared to 3,824 (52%) in 2012 and 4418 (52%) in 2011.
**Homelessness in Houston/Harris County/Ft. Bend Counties**

HUD’s rules and regulations dictate the definition of homelessness that was used for the count, and these figures were 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). When these numbers are added to the 2013 PIT Count (Figure 3), the total number of homeless in the region is 7,366 with the largest percentage sheltered (46%).

A comparison was made using this expanded definition of homelessness between 2011 and 2013 (Figure 4). In 2011, 11,152 individuals were deemed to be homeless using the expanded definition. The 2013 finding of 7,366 represents a 34% decrease or 3,786 fewer people in the total number of those counted experiencing homelessness, a similar decrease to that found when assessing using only the HUD definition of homelessness. However, the caveat must again be stated that the PIT count is exactly that, a count, and may not be measuring all persons experiencing homelessness. The decrease seen, however, is encouraging and it does represent general trend over the past three years.

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**Figure 3**

![Pie Chart](chart.png)

**Homeless in Houston/Harris/Ft. Bend Counties (n=7,366)**

- Unsheltered: 2,978
- Sheltered: 3,381
- Harris Co. Jail: 1,007
Concomitant with the observed decrease in the number of persons counted who were experiencing homelessness is an increase in the number of persons in permanent supportive housing from 2012-2013. Figure 5 shows this increase from 2011 through 2013.
Characteristics of Those Experiencing Homelessness

HUD requires that certain subpopulations of the homeless are enumerated along with the total number of homeless. These subpopulations include veterans, chronically homeless individuals and families\(^1\), victims of domestic violence, persons with HIV/AIDS, and those who are severely mentally ill or chronic substance abusers. This information can be easily captured by the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) for those in shelters, but 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 317 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. Information was based on self-reporting and so may over or under represent the true percentage in the population. Estimates for those who are HIV positive or had experienced domestic violence were obtained by applying the results found during the 2012 needs assessment survey. Results for both the total homeless population surveyed and broken down by sheltered and unsheltered status are shown in Figure 6 and discussed below.

Among those experiencing homelessness on the night of January 29, 2013, approximately one in seven (15%) were US Veterans (those who served in the military or activated in the National Guard), down significantly from the 2012 estimate of 26%. Fewer than one in ten (8%) of these homeless veterans were women. Among the total homeless population counted, approximately one in five (19%) met the HUD definition of a chronic homeless individual while only two out of hundred (2%) homeless individuals were part of a chronically homeless family. The approximate age of individuals observed the night of the count was recorded for the unsheltered and documented for the sheltered and those who took part in YouthCount! (see section below). Of the unsheltered homeless, one out of forty (2.5%) were under age 18. This number was over one in four (28%) of the sheltered homeless, although two out of three were in transitional housing, not emergency shelters. There were 21 (0.5%) unaccompanied children under the age of 18 sleeping in the shelters.

Other self-reported subpopulations include one in four (26%) with severe mental illness and almost one in three (31%) with chronic substance abuse. One in 25 (4%) were HIV positive and one in four (24%) had experienced domestic violence. However, due to a number of dedicated beds for persons with these characteristics, these percentages may not be true of the homeless as a total group.

\(^{1}\) 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 disabiling 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 in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or safe haven on the night of the PIT count, one in seventeen (6%) were classified as a chronically homeless individual. Fifteen chronically homeless families were documented comprising 1.4% of the sheltered homeless. These percentages among the unsheltered population were 33% and 2.6%, respectively.

Not surprisingly, both percent with mental illness and those with chronic substance abuse were higher among the unsheltered than sheltered homeless (35% vs. 18% and 36% vs. 27%). The percent with HIV and those who had experienced domestic violence were higher among the sheltered but again, this may be due to the availability of dedicated beds for these subpopulations.

**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 2013. The enumeration was held on the night of 29 January. A total of 6,359 persons experiencing homeless were counted with 2,978 (47%)
unsheltered homeless individuals (staying in a place not meant for human habitation) and 3,381 (53%) staying in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or safe haven that evening. Most of these individuals were found in Harris County (98%). An expanded definition of homelessness led to a total count of 7,366 individuals.

The 2013 PIT count represents a 14% decrease in the number of homeless individuals counted compared to the number counted in January 2012 and a 26% compared to the number counted in January 2011. The use of similar methodologies would have eliminated artificial variations due to differences in how we count those experiencing homelessness. 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.
2013 YouthCount!

A pilot project took place in Houston and eight other cities to enhance the count of unaccompanied homeless and doubled up/precariously housed youth (ages 24 and younger) on the night of the Point-in-Time count. This was done in one of two ways:

School districts in Houston, Harris County, and Ft. Bend County collaborated in administering a brief questionnaire to youth in school that were thought to be homeless. A total of 218 valid surveys were collected. Six students had been in a shelter the night of the PIT Count, 1 was unsheltered, and 3 had their own apartment. The vast majority (208) were in doubled up living conditions, although many were with family members, although not legal guardians. The average age was 16.6 years, with a range of 11 to 21.

The second method was to send survey teams to places where homeless youth were known to congregate or be sheltered including Houston Area Women’s Center, Ft. Bend Women’s Center, HAY Center, Kinder Shelter, Star of Hope, Salvation Army Social Services, Covenant House, Open Gate Bering UMC, Youth Advocates and Montrose Grace Place. They approached individuals in the age group (or appeared to be in the age group) and asked a series of questions to obtain basic demographic information as well as reasons for homelessness.

A total of 160 youth who were unsheltered (19%), sheltered (54%), or doubled up/precariously housed (28%) on the night of January 29, 2013 were surveyed. The average age of those surveyed was 20 with a range of 12-24. Approximately half were male and slightly over half were Black. One-quarter indicated they were of Hispanic ethnicity. Approximately one in five youth identified as gay or bisexual and 11 transgender youth were surveyed. One-third of respondents had their own children and one out of six females was currently pregnant.

Two out of three youth surveyed were not currently in school and 1 out of 3 had not completed high school, although several were enrolled in GED programs. One in four had completed some college. Three out of four had not worked within the past week. Slightly over one in three had been in juvenile detention or the penal system within the past 12 months.

Experience with foster care was high, with two of five having been in foster care. The most common reason for leaving foster care was aging out of the system, although some had been reunited with family or adopted by grandparents or others.

The vast majority (76%) of the youth interviewed had their last permanent home in the greater Houston area while nine were from Texas (outside Houston) and 17 (11%) from other states. Approximately one in four had worked for pay during the previous week and over half (53%) had been in juvenile detention or jail/prison at some point during the last year.