

# **Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County/Montgomery County**

## **2017 Point-in-Time Count Report**



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## Overview

A Point-In-Time (PIT) Count of sheltered and unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness in the Houston, Harris County, Fort Bend County, and Montgomery County area was conducted over a three-day period from January 24-26, 2017 with an official date of the night of 23 January. The purpose of the Count is to determine the number of persons experiencing homelessness [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. The Way Home Continuum of Care (CoC) covers a vast geographic region (3,711 sq. miles, including all of Houston, Harris County, Fort Bend County, and Montgomery County) with a large dispersed unsheltered population. Due to the size of the geographic area covered by the Count, we know that not all unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness can be identified in a short period of time (we are much more confident about counting the number of those experiencing homelessness who are sheltered). However, the PIT Count gives a good assessment of the extent of the problem in the region and can allow for comparisons over time to help understand how well a community is solving the problem of homelessness.

The PIT Count was organized and led by the Coalition for the Homeless in consultation with UTHealth School of Public Health. Many homeless services providers participated as well as community volunteers, including homeless and formerly homeless persons.

The 2017 PIT counted individuals staying in a total of 61 shelters including emergency shelters (n=32), transitional housing units (n=29), and safe havens (n=0) on the night of 23 January based on reports received from the providers and data entered into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Unsheltered homeless individuals (those sleeping on the streets or in other places not meant for habitation) were counted using direct engagement and interview when possible, and observation if not. Teams walked under bridges, along the

bayous and other areas where encampments of homeless individuals had been identified. They also investigated abandoned buildings where homeless persons may be residing.

### **Changes from 2011 through 2017 in PIT Count Methodology**

A major change to the PIT Count in 2017 was the addition of Montgomery County to the geographical area to be canvassed. Montgomery County lies to the north of Harris County with 1,047 square miles ([http://www.mctx.org/for\\_visitors/index.php](http://www.mctx.org/for_visitors/index.php)). While results from Montgomery County are included in the description of findings from the 2017 Count, comparisons with previous six years' results exclude this additional area to allow for a valid assessment. This year's results will serve as a baseline for future year Counts that will continue to include Montgomery County.

Several significant changes were made in the methodology of the 2016 and 2017 unsheltered counts compared to the previous five years. In the past, the PIT Count has been a purely observational one, performed during a single night between the hours of approximately 5 to 11 pm. Beginning in 2016, we undertook to directly engage and interview, when possible<sup>1</sup>, every person experiencing homelessness in the jurisdiction using a Coordinated Access approach. This was possible because of the dramatic decrease in the number of those experiencing homelessness in the area due to the community's success in housing individuals through permanent housing strategies. There is a danger of counting people twice or mistaking them as unsheltered, however, with this method as someone on the street during the day may have been in a shelter the night before or approached twice during the three-day period. We guarded against this in three ways:

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<sup>1</sup>We were not able to engage and interview those who refused, those who were sleeping, those who were physically impossible to reach (e.g., spotted across a highway), or those whom the interviewer felt it would be dangerous to approach. This was approximately half of those sighted.

- The geographic region to be covered was divided into three areas and each area was canvassed on a specific day of the Count
- Interviewees were asked if they had been questioned previously and, if so, they were not included more than once in the Count
- Interviewees were asked where they slept on the night of 23 January 2017 (the official night of the Count) and were classified as unsheltered homeless only if they slept in a place not meant for human habitation, per HUD guidelines. This assured that we did not double count someone who was included in the HMIS shelter count and that we did not include those who appeared as if they were experiencing homelessness but were not, according to HUD guidelines.

Several improvements implemented in previous years were continued. Traditional homeless services providers were involved under the umbrella of the The Way Home CoC and the Coalition for the Homeless, along with academia (UTHealth School of Public Health). This included the use of over 150 surveyors recruited from the homeless provider community, outreach teams, and VA staff. The CoC drew on consumer volunteers (persons who had in the past or were currently experiencing homelessness) to provide expertise and guidance during the Count. We continued the use 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. Observational counts of people not able to be interviewed (see footnote above) were performed.

With approval from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the unsheltered count took place over three days, January 24-26, 2017, with the night of 23 January designated as the official date for the Count. The geographic area for the PIT was divided into 3 sections for purposes of counting unsheltered individuals. On each day of the count, at least 60 volunteer teams canvassed the area designated for that day to interview unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness. Four to five Staging Area locations were set up each day of the Count with a total of 15 Staging Area Captains and co-Captains between all locations.

A survey tool was designed to collect selected demographic and personal characteristics of those interviewed, including both data required for the PIT Count report to HUD and other information to assist in designing programs to house the homeless. Whereas in the past the survey tool was on paper, we now use a tablet-based survey. There are several advantages to this including the ability to link to HMIS. All individuals and families who were identified as being chronically homeless, youth/young adults (under 24), and veterans were assessed for housing on the spot by one of 25-trained Coordinated Access Assessors. Due to GPS mapping technology included with the tablets, the PIT execution and data could be monitored in real time. Volunteers could be tracked while conducting assessment based on the user IDs assigned

The enhanced methodology developed in previous years for the sheltered count also was continued. All emergency shelters and transitional housing in the area, whether or not they were officially part of the HMIS, were contacted and inventoried. Shelter providers were trained on entering data and assessments into HMIS and given the opportunity to confirm the data counted on the night of the PIT Count. Shelters that do not use HMIS such as domestic violence shelters were asked to report their numbers on 23 January using the housing inventory chart.

The following training sessions were held before the 2017 PIT:

- The Coalition for the Homeless hosted a Case Manager Resource Exchange on December 13, 2016 dedicated to filling key positions for the PIT Count by members of The Way Home CoC. A one-hour presentation on the PIT Count methodology was conducted.
- Four volunteer trainings were conducted on the 12th, 17th, and 19<sup>th</sup> of January 2017, respectively.
  - Three of the trainings were targeted at volunteers from partnering agencies serving those experiencing homelessness. Tablets were only assigned to those who were experienced in working with this population. This training involved

- the use of tablets & assignment of user IDs and log-ins. Tablets were available for hands-on use and volunteers practiced entering information for each question on the tablet survey tool.
- The fourth training was held for community volunteers. This training included the role of the driver, how to read maps, how to identify homeless hot spots, and proper etiquette to follow when approaching someone that might be experiencing homelessness.
  - Staging Area Captains were trained on January 23, 2017. This included the use and distribution of tablets, volunteer sign-in, distribution of maps, and map interpretation.

### **2017 PIT Count Key Findings**

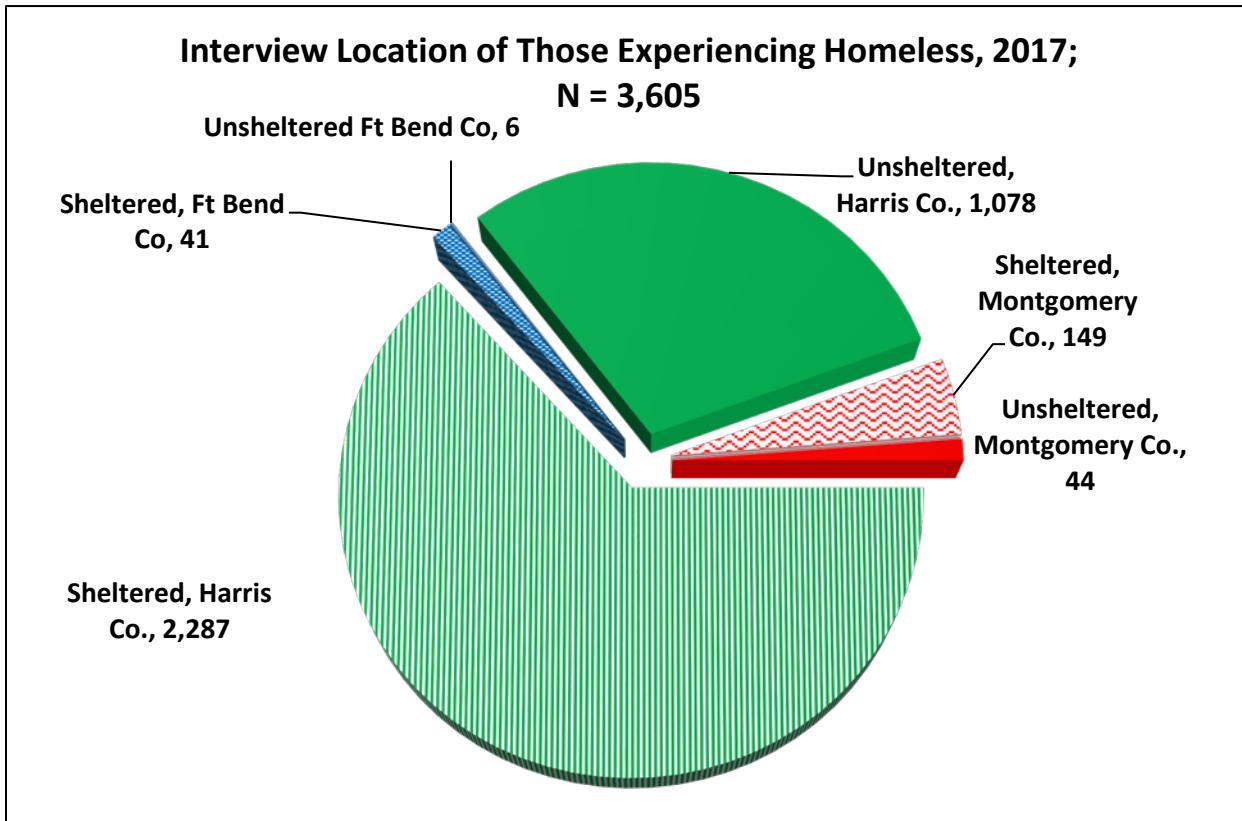
Data collected shows a total of 3,605 sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals (per HUD's definition) in the Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County/Montgomery County region during the PIT Count (Figure 1). Breaking down where those experiencing homelessness were found, we determined that most were in Houston/Harris County with only one out of 75 (1.3%) counted in Fort Bend county while approximately one out of twenty persons experiencing homelessness were found in Montgomery County (5.3%). It is important to note that, for those who were unsheltered on the night of 23 January, geographical assignment was determined by where they were interviewed during the day, which may be near where they seek services, not necessarily where they sleep.

The combined population of Houston, Harris County, Fort Bend County and Montgomery County, according to population estimates on 1 July 2016, was 5,887,368<sup>2</sup>. This puts the percent of homeless individuals within these three counties at 0.061% or one out of every 1,629 residents. To allow comparisons over previous years (when Montgomery County was not included), we calculated the homelessness rate in only Houston/Harris County and Fort Bend

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/> accessed 24 April 2017

County. The combined population within these two counties on 1 July 2016 was 5,331,165. This puts the number of homeless individuals at 1 out of every 1,563 residents compared to 1 out of 1,450 residents in 2016 and 1 out of every 450 residents in 2011, a substantial decrease.



**Figure 1**

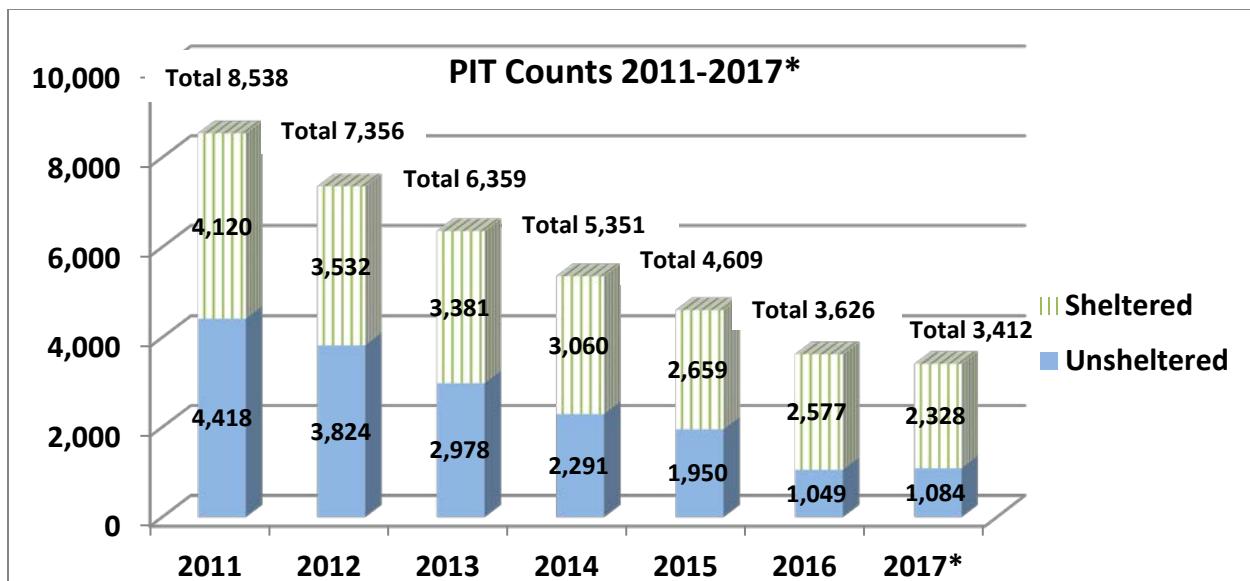
#### **Comparison between 2017 and 2011-2016 PIT Counts**

Figure 2 shows findings from the last seven years of the PIT Count. While the PIT Counts during years 2011-2015 used a standardized observational count methodology and so valid comparisons can be made between those years, the methodology changed significantly in 2016 and so evaluations must be made with caution. An observational count over our vast geographic area during a single night (like those PIT Counts conducted from 2011-2015) is likely to miss some people and therefore result in an undercount. In addition, there is no way to

verify that those observed during an observational count are actually homeless per the HUD definition or that they were not counted before, despite best efforts, leading to an overcount. In 2016, to obtain a more accurate count, we began directly engaging and interviewing all persons presumed to be experiencing homeless. This method also has limitations. We may not have identified all persons (leading to an undercount) or may count persons twice (leading to an overcount), despite best efforts to avoid this. However, we had the advantage of talking to those interviewed and so asked them if they had interviewed previously and collected information on whether or not they qualified as homeless per the HUD definition. We were not able to interview approximately half of the total unsheltered population. We applied the percentage of those not homeless or previously counted among those we were able to interview to those we were not able to interview. We then subtracted that number of people from the “not interviewed” group, assuming they were not truly homeless or had been previously counted.

Data from Montgomery County is not included in the comparisons (Figure 2) as this is the first year the CoC included that area in the PIT Count. Montgomery County data from 2017 will be used as a baseline for comparison in future years.

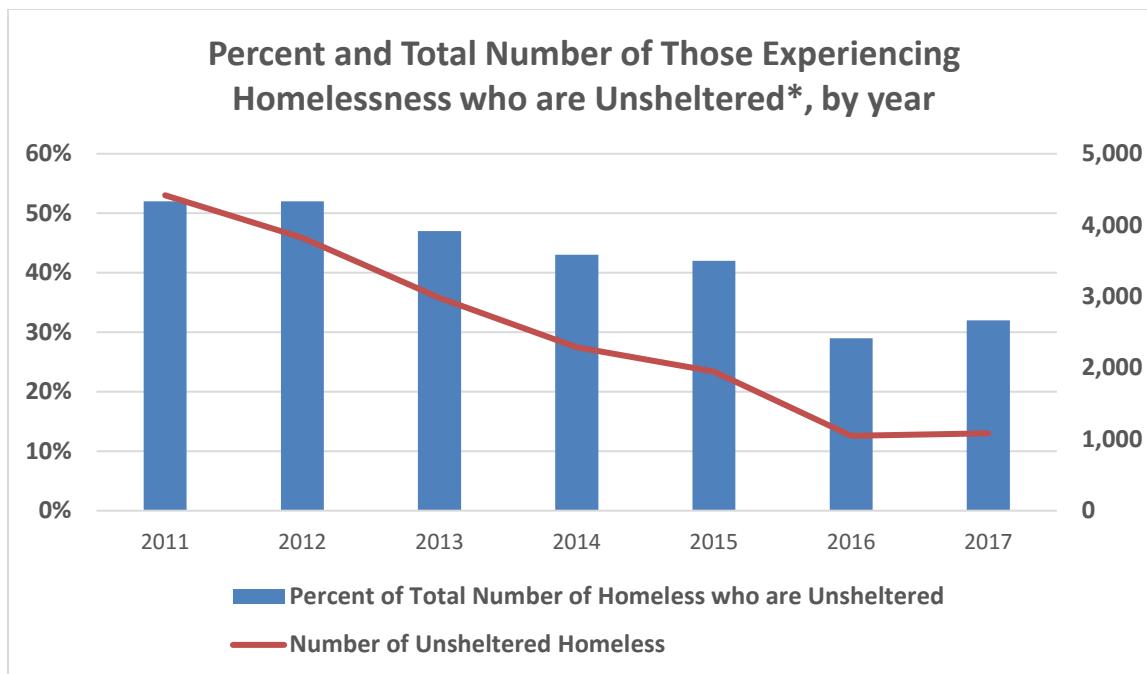
The 2017 PIT Count of 3,412 persons experiencing homelessness (Houston/Harris/Fort Bend Counties only) shows a decrease of 5,126 persons from that found in 2011. This corresponds to a 60% decrease compared to the 2011 count and a 6% decrease compared to the 2016 PIT Count of sheltered and unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness. The decrease seen is encouraging, particularly given the increase in population of the Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County area by approximately 541,000 over the past six years. While the precise magnitude of homelessness cannot be determined, the level and trend of the decrease does provide solid evidence that the number of persons experiencing homelessness in the Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County area has decreased over the past six years.



\*includes data from Houston/Harris County/Ft. Bend County only for comparison purposes with previous years

**Figure 2**

In 2017, 1,128 of those experiencing homelessness (one third of the total and including Montgomery County) were found on the streets or in places not meant for habitation compared to over 50% in 2011. Only data from Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County (unsheltered number = 1,084) are included for comparison purposes to previous years (Figures 2 & 3). This also shows an encouraging trend and may reflect successes of The Way Home's focus on placing homeless individuals into permanent housing and its Coordinated Access system.

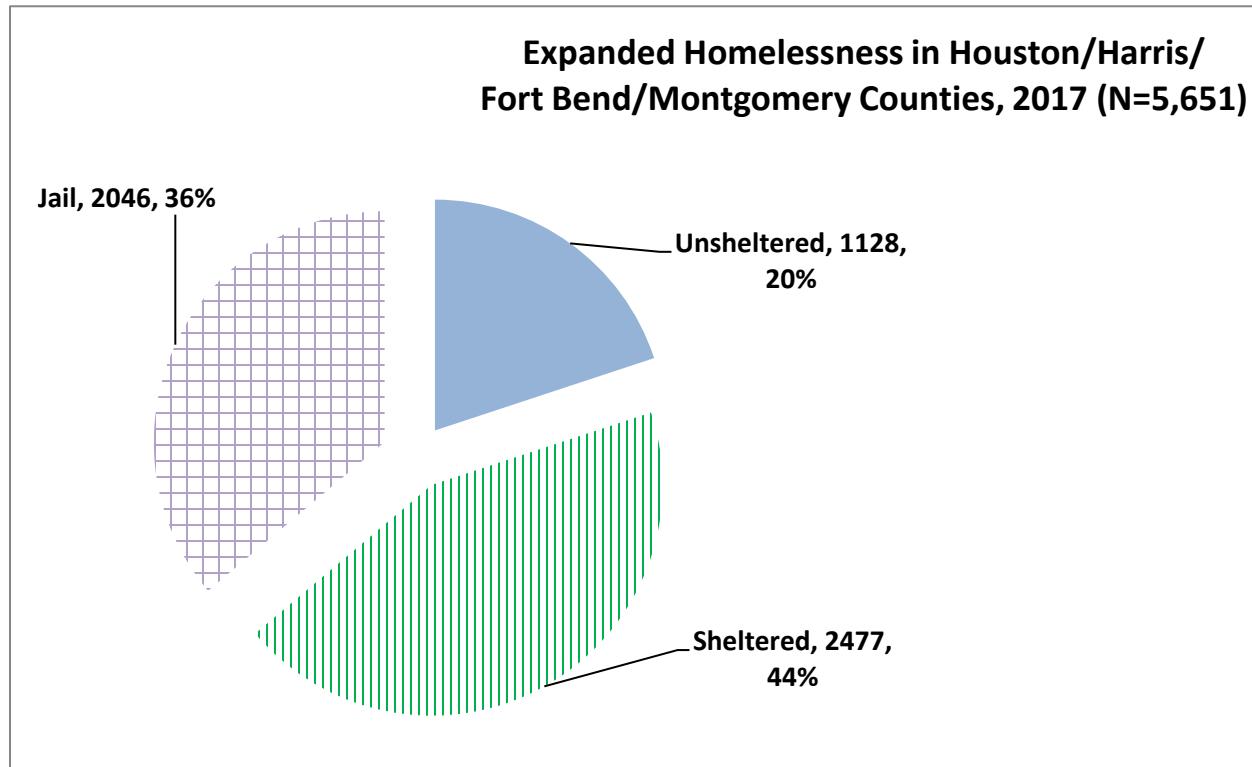


**Figure 3**

\*Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County only

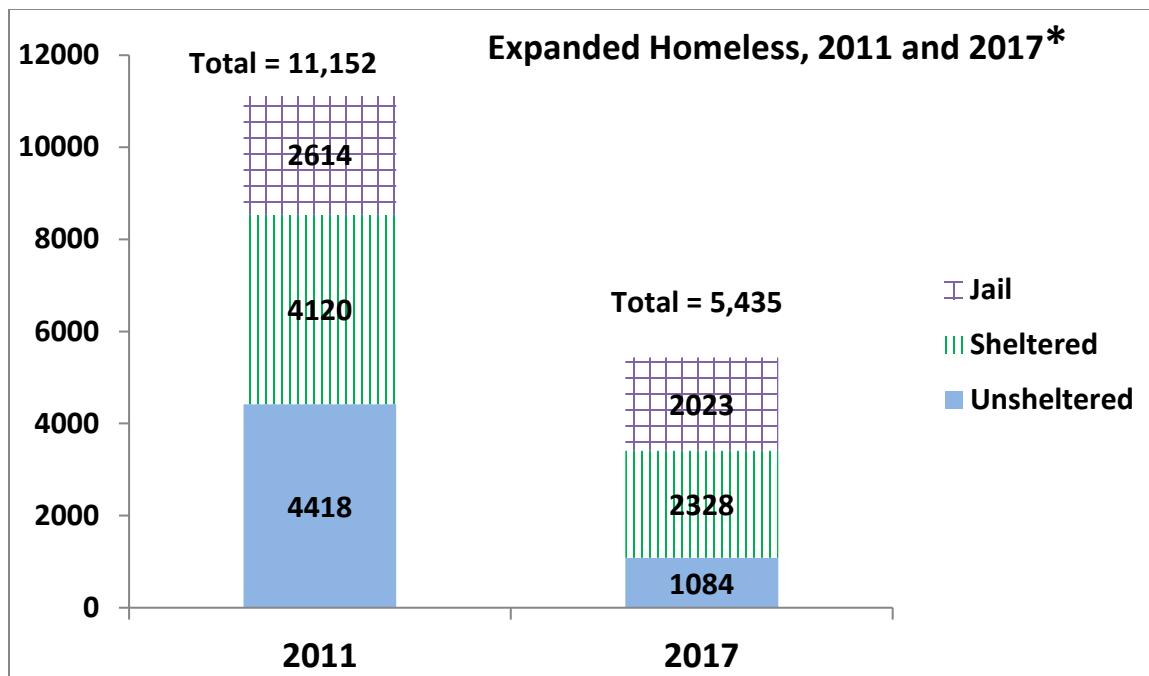
**Homelessness in Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County/Montgomery County using an Expanded Definition**

HUD's rules and regulations dictate the definition of homelessness used for the Count, and these figures are reported to HUD in the Homeless Data Exchange. However, a more complete picture of homelessness in the region can be obtained by widening the definition of homelessness to include individuals in county jails (Harris, Fort Bend, and Montgomery) the night of the Count who indicated that they were homeless before arrest (and therefore likely to be so after release). When these numbers are added to the 2017 PIT Count (Figure 4), the total number of homeless individuals in the region is 5,651 with the largest percentage sheltered (44%).



**Figure 4**

A comparison of data from 2011 and 2017 using this expanded definition of homelessness is shown in Figure 5. Again, only data from Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County are included for comparison purposes, as 2017 will serve as the baseline for future comparisons including Montgomery County. In 2011, 11,152 individuals were deemed to be experiencing homelessness in Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County using the expanded definition. The 2017 finding of 5,435 represents a 51% decrease or 5,717 fewer people in the total number of those counted experiencing homelessness (expanded definition) since 2011, a decrease similar to that found when assessing using only the HUD definition of homelessness. The largest decrease was in the unsheltered population (75% fewer unsheltered homeless in 2017 compared to 2011). The number of persons experiencing homelessness who were in jail the night of the Count showed the smallest decrease at 22%. The decreases seen are encouraging, particularly given the estimated increase of over 541,000 in the population of Harris and Fort Bend Counties over the last six years.



\*Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County only for comparison purposes

**Figure 5**

### **Permanent Housing**

At the same time as the observed decrease in the number of persons counted experiencing homelessness is an increase in the number of persons placed in permanent housing. Permanent housing (PH) consists of Rapid Re-housing (RRH) and Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) programs. From January 2012 to March 2017, 9,015 homeless persons have been placed in permanent housing. Another 2,221 veterans (note: household member numbers for these veterans are not available) were housed through the HUD-VASH program for a minimum of 11,236 formerly homeless persons housed over the last five and a quarter years.

## **Characteristics of Those Experiencing Homelessness**

HUD requires that certain subpopulations of persons experiencing homelessness be counted along with the total number of homeless persons. These subpopulations include:

- Veterans
- Chronically homeless individuals and families<sup>3</sup>
- Survivors of domestic violence
- Persons with HIV/AIDS
- Severely mentally ill
- Experiencing chronic substance use disorder (alcohol and/or drugs).

This information can be captured by HMIS for those in shelters (although only those answering positively to a question are counted and so we cannot distinguish between negative responses and missing responses). The total shelter (or total number of adults in the shelter) population was used as the denominator to calculate percentages, but the actual percent may be higher, given that some responses may be missing.

It is more difficult to get this information on the unsheltered population, as these characteristics cannot be determined by observation. In previous years during the observational counts, we administered paper surveys to those interviewed by outreach specialist teams the night of the Count and the next morning to clients at agencies providing meals or day services to the homeless community to provide an estimation of the percent of these subpopulations. For the 2016 and 2017 Counts, due to the use of electronic surveys, we

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<sup>3</sup> HUD's definition of chronic homelessness is four or more episodes of homelessness within the past three years for a total of 12 months or longer 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) and prevents them from holding a job. 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). For sheltered individuals, they must be staying in emergency shelter or safe haven, but not in transitional housing.

were able to capture information on all of those interviewed. Unfortunately, however, only approximately half of the unsheltered homeless were interviewed due to interviewee refusal or inability to access the person. The results from those interviewed were extrapolated to the total community of those experiencing homelessness. One caveat is that information was based on self-reporting and so may not represent the true percentage in the homeless population.

The age range of the total homeless population and by sheltered or unsheltered status on the night of January 23 is shown in Figures 6a-c. In the total population, three out of four persons experiencing homelessness were over the age of 24. Approximately one out of six were under the age of 18. However, all of those under age 18 were in sheltered situations except for one person who slept on the streets that night. One-third of those under age 18 were in transitional housing. Two unaccompanied youth under the age of 18 years were in an emergency shelter the night of the Count. The unsheltered population was older with over nine out of ten (92%) between ages 25 and 64 and a small group 65 or older (2%). The sheltered homeless population was younger. Of the 2477 persons in emergency shelter or transitional housing, one of four (24%) was below the age of 18 years and one out of 16 (7%), ages 18-24 years.

### Age Distribution of Total Population Experiencing Homelessness

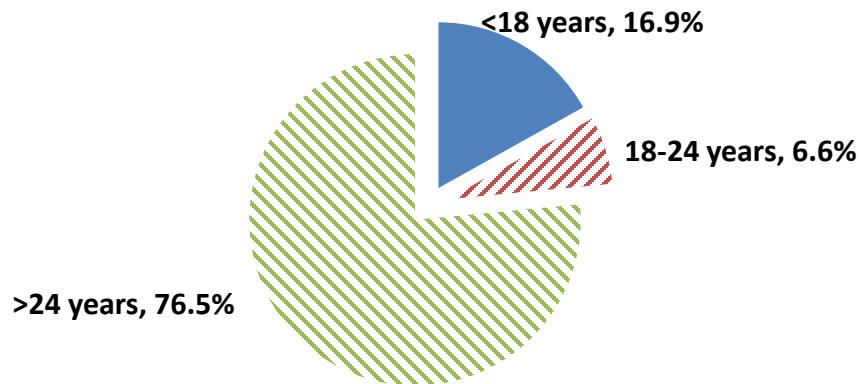


Figure 6a

### Age Distribution of Unsheltered Persons Experiencing Homelessness

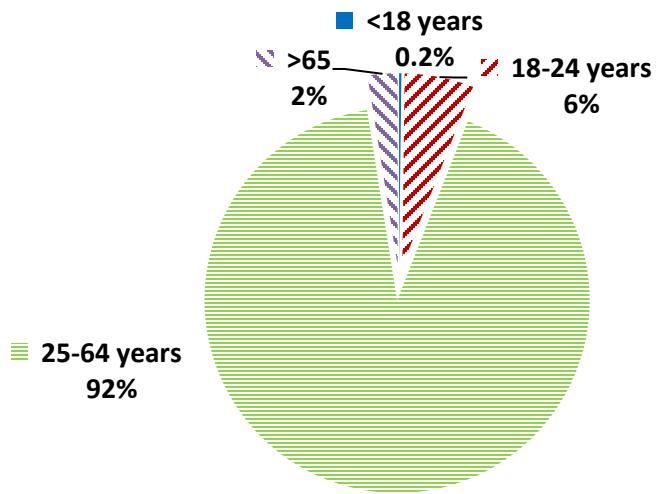


Figure 6b

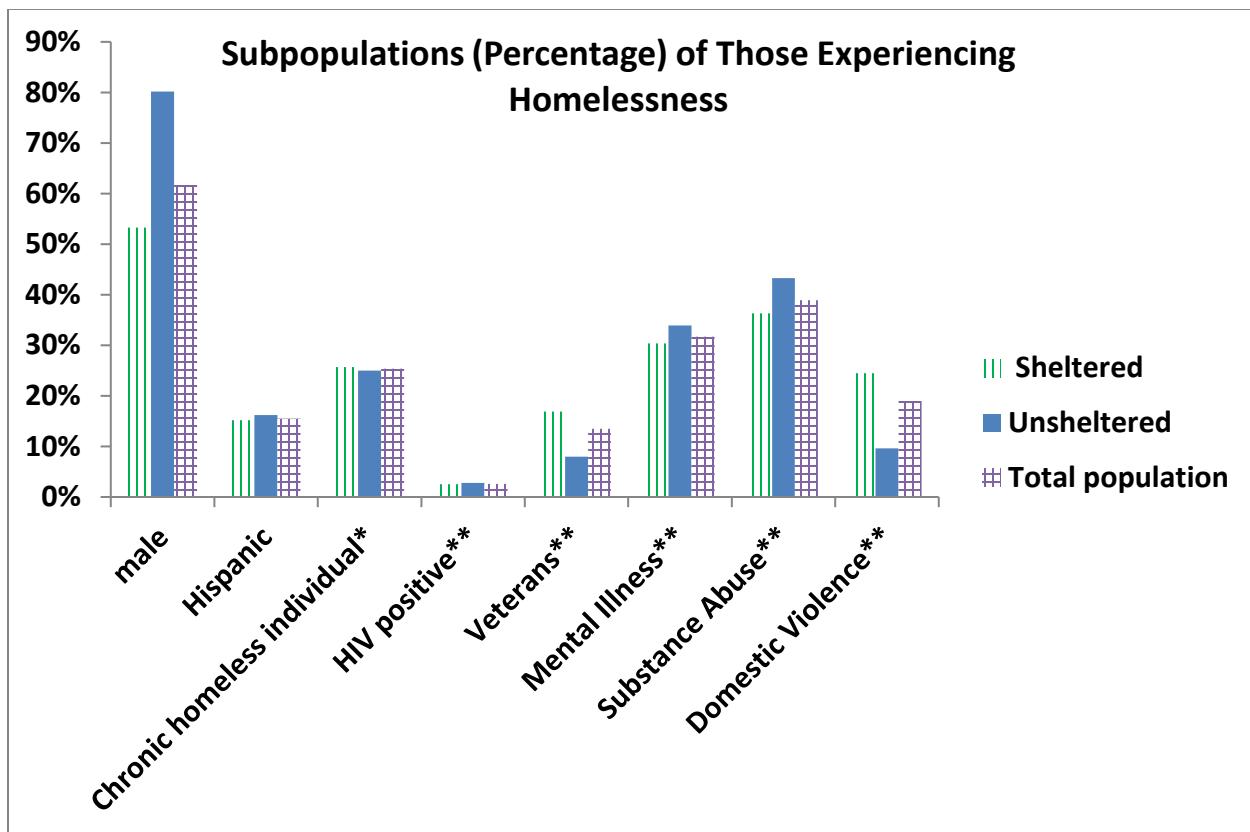
### **Age Distribution of Sheltered Persons Experiencing Homelessness**



**Figure 6c**

Figures 7 and 8 show subpopulations for the total homeless population surveyed as well as a breakdown by sheltered and unsheltered status. Overall, three out of five persons in the total population experiencing homeless were male with a higher percentage in the unsheltered population (80%). Only seven persons experiencing homelessness identified as transgender. Two out of thirteen (5.5%) identified as Hispanic with no substantial differences between the sheltered and unsheltered populations.

The number of veterans (those who served in the military or activated into the National Guard with service of 2 or more years) experiencing homelessness decreased 25% from 2016 ( $N = 537$ ) to 2017 ( $N = 405$ ). Gap analysis and take down targeting have been predicting an annual steady state volume of between 1200 and 1400 homeless veterans based on opposing actions of successful housing efforts versus returning veterans and those falling temporarily back into



**Figure 7**

\*among sheltered individuals, only those in emergency shelters can be designated chronically homeless

\*\*among adults only

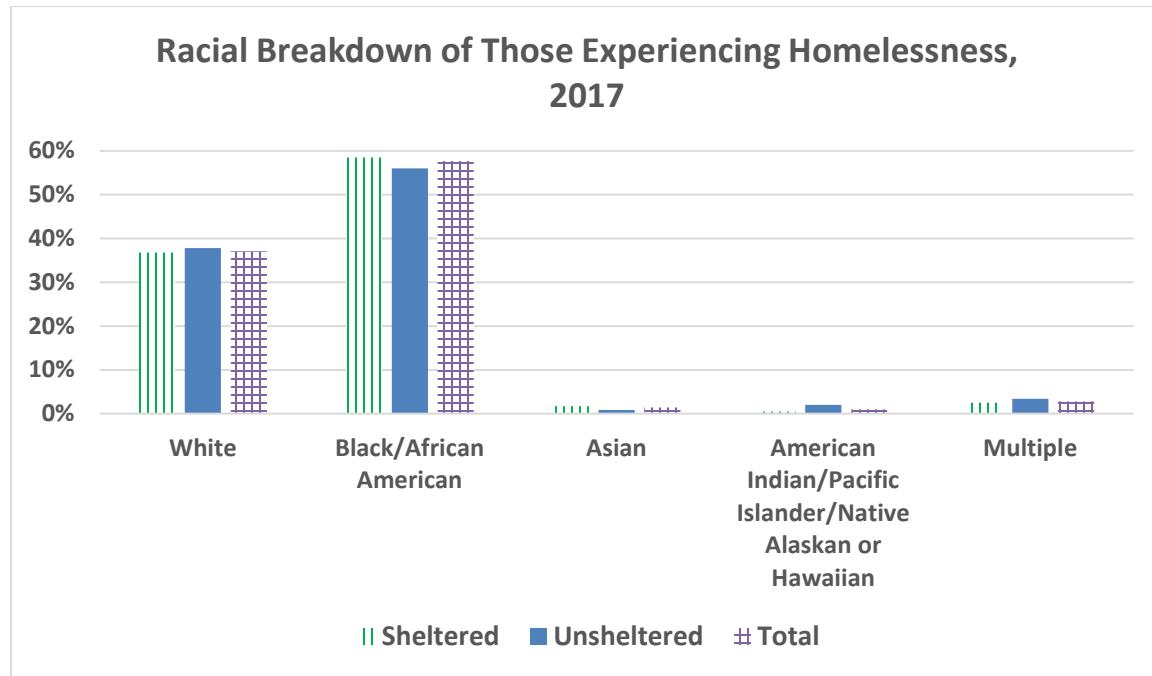
homelessness. The 2017 PIT number (on a given night) is reflective of this annual steady state volume. Over three out of four (78%) of the 405 homeless veterans identified this year were in emergency shelters or transitional housing, a slight increase over the 75% found last year. It is important to note that of the 90 veterans who were unsheltered the night of the Count, 21% had a dishonorable or other than honorable discharge from the military and thus not eligible for VA benefits (note: type of military discharge not collected on those veterans in shelter). However, The Way Home has funding available to provide permanent housing for those Veterans.

Among the total homeless population counted, one in four met the HUD definition of a chronically homeless individual. This is much higher than that found in 2016 – however,

reporting requirements changed in 2017 and now both children and adults can be considered chronically homeless (whereas previously only adults could be chronically homeless). If one person in a household is classified as chronically homeless, all household members are considered so. Rates were similar among the sheltered and unsheltered. Included in this number are 44 households with children for a total of 139 persons.

Other subpopulations reported in the total adult population experiencing homelessness include nearly one in three (32%) with self-reported serious mental illness and two out of five (39%) with substance use disorder (alcohol and/or other drugs). Unsurprisingly, both mental illness and substance abuse were higher in the unsheltered vs. the sheltered population.

Approximately one in thirty-eight (2.6%) of the total population experiencing homelessness reported as HIV positive although the true percentage may be higher since many may not have been tested and therefore don't know their status. Over one in three of those in shelters had experienced domestic violence, not surprising since there are shelter beds specifically dedicated to those fleeing domestic violence.

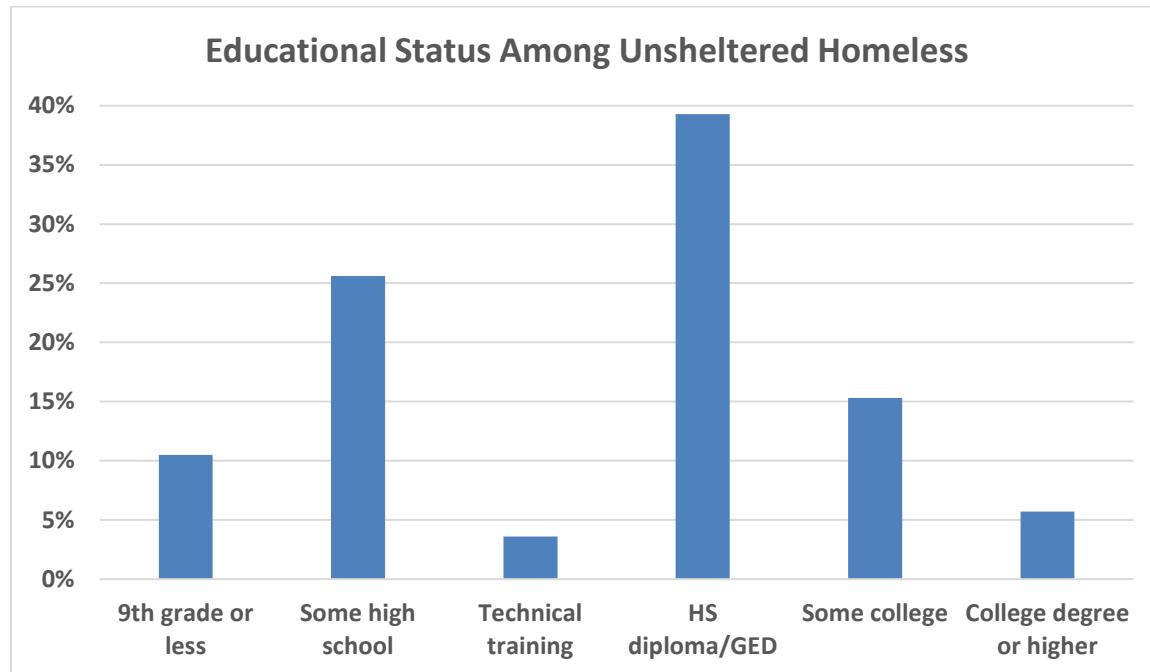


**Figure 8**

The racial self-classification of those experiencing homelessness is shown in Figure 8. The clear majority of those experiencing homelessness were White or Black/African-American. Racial classification did not vary substantially between the sheltered and unsheltered populations.

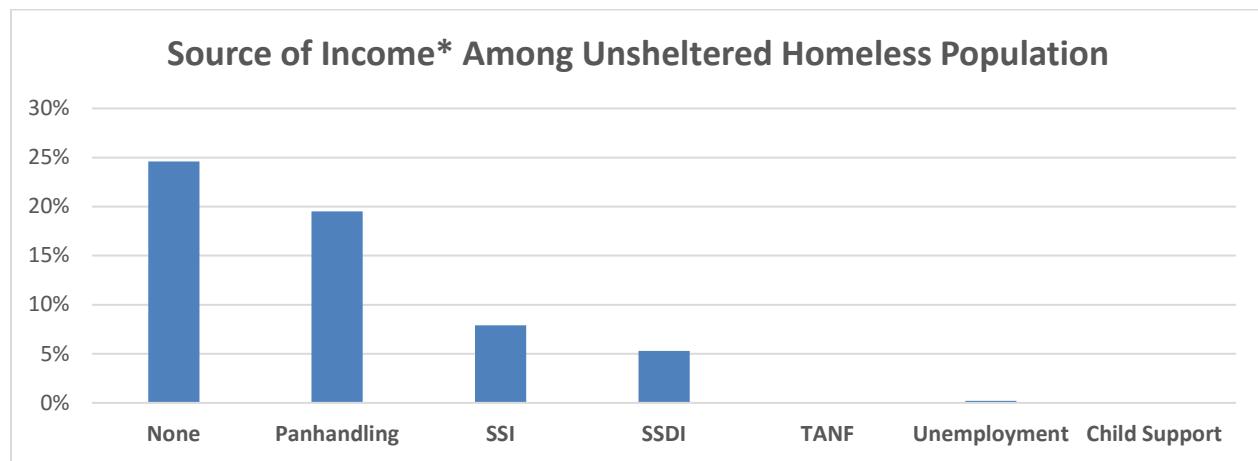
**Characteristics of Unsheltered Persons Experiencing Homelessness**

Persons who slept in a place not meant for human habitation (unsheltered) were surveyed and data collected via tablets. We collected additional information on this population other than that required by HUD for the PIT Count and results are shown below. One caveat is that we were able to interview and collect data on only half of the unsheltered homeless (see footnote, page 3) and so results may not be generalizable to the total group of those experiencing homelessness as those we were able to interview may have different characteristics than those whom we were not. All data was self-reported.



**Figure 9**

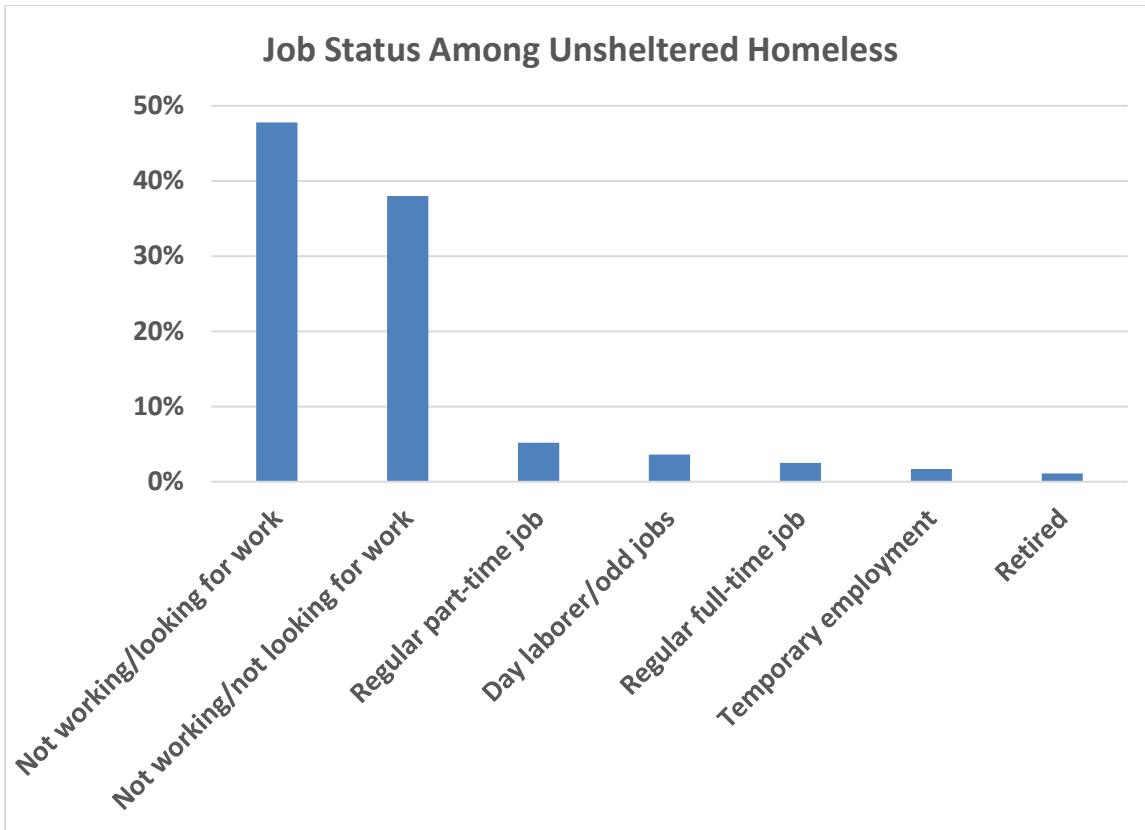
We asked about highest educational level obtained (Figure 9). Three out of five of the unsheltered homeless individuals had at least a high school diploma or GED but one in ten had completed ninth grade or less. One of five had some college, college degree, or higher. Source of income was queried (Figure 10). The two main sources of income reported were from panhandling and SSI and SSDI. One of five unsheltered homeless were observed panhandling by interviewers. One in four (24.5%) reporting no income source. Current job status is shown in Figure 11 with over four out of five (86%) not working but approximately half (48%) looking for work.



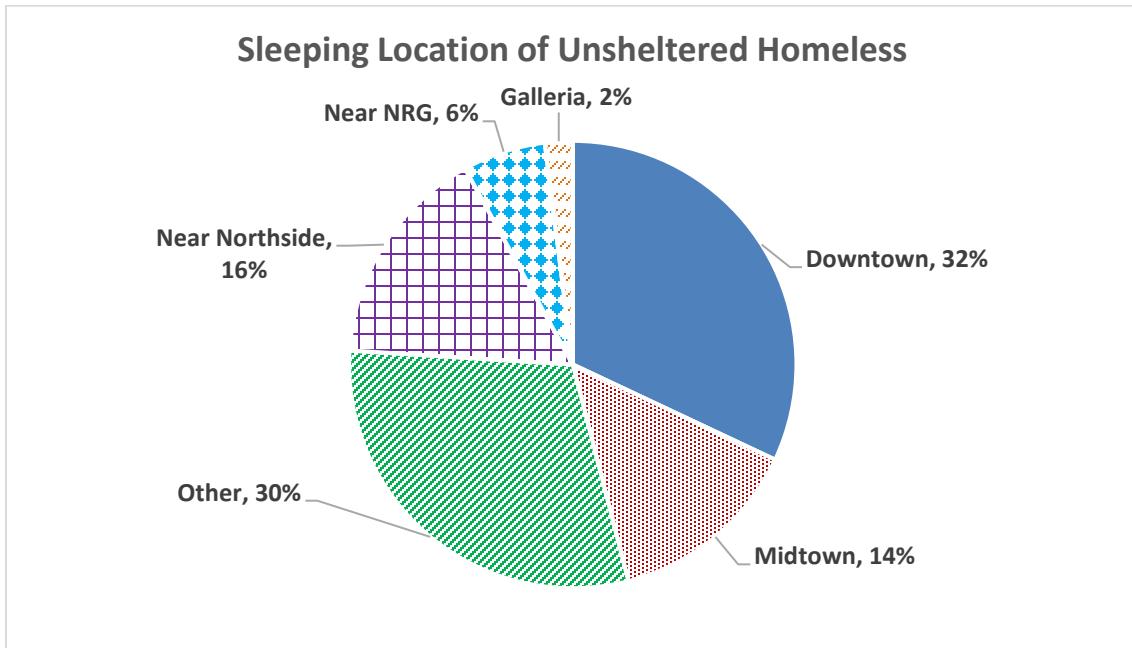
\*More than one source of income could be reported

**Figure 10**

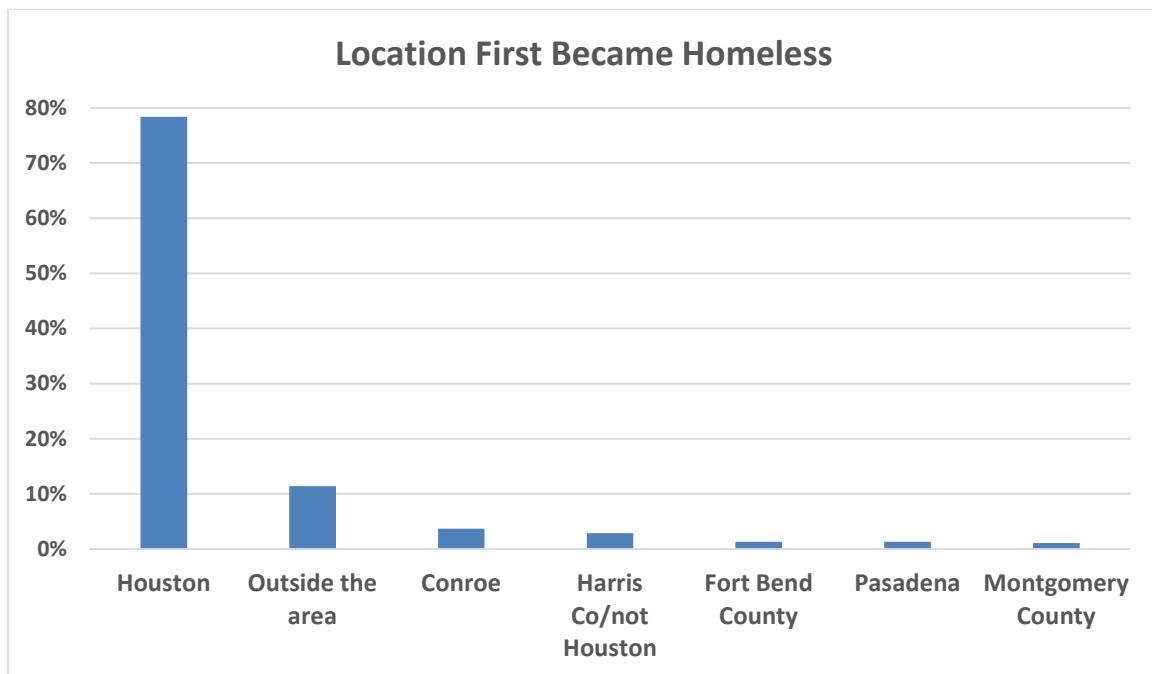
The part of town in which people usually slept was asked as well as where they first became homeless (Figures 12 and 13). Nearly half of those interviewed had slept in downtown or midtown Houston but almost one in three indicated "Other". Over three out of four first became homeless in Houston with smaller percentages in the outlying areas although one of ten indicated they first became homeless outside the Greater Houston area.



**Figure 11**



**Figure 12**



**Figure 13**

### Summary and Conclusions

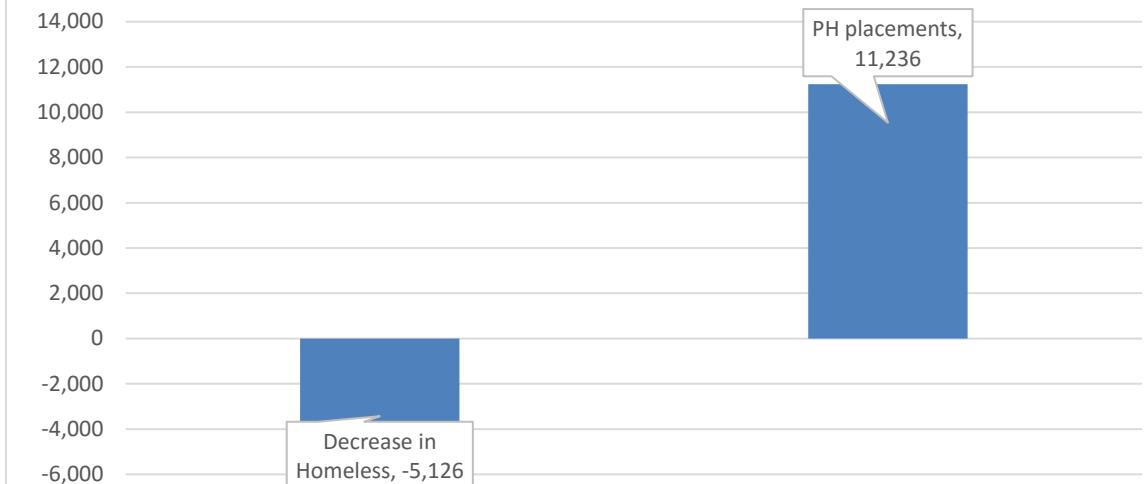
New methodology designed in 2011 to increase the completeness and accuracy of the Point-In-Time Count of sheltered and unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness in the Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County region was used until 2015. Beginning last year, due to the community's success in decreasing the number of those experiencing homelessness, a modified approach using direct engagement and interview was implemented to count those who were unsheltered. The unsheltered count took place over three days in January and we attempted to interview every person identified thought to be experiencing homelessness. If that was not possible, observational data was recorded. An important change this year is that Montgomery County was added to the PIT Count, and so data from that region was not included in comparisons with previous counts (Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County).

A total of 3,605 persons experiencing homelessness were counted in Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County/Montgomery County, with 1,128 (31%) unsheltered homeless individuals (staying in a place not meant for human habitation) and 2,477 (69%) staying in emergency shelters or transitional housing the evening of 23 January 2017. No persons were staying in safe havens. Most of these individuals were interviewed in Harris County (93.4%). A much smaller percent was interviewed in Fort Bend County (1.3%) and Montgomery County (5.3%). However, it is important to note that the unsheltered persons were classified as to where they were interviewed or spotted, not where they slept the night of the Count. Persons move around during the day and may congregate near services. An expanded definition of homelessness which includes those in jails in those three counties on the night of the count who indicated that they were homeless before arrest led to a total count of 5,651 individuals.

The 2017 PIT Count represents a 60% decrease in the number of homeless individuals counted compared to the number counted in January 2011 and a 6% decrease compared to the number counted in January 2016 (Figures 2 and 14, both exclude Montgomery County data). This corresponds to over 5,700 fewer people experiencing homelessness over the past six years in the Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County area. This is even more impressive, given that the population of that area has increased by approximately 541,000 during that time. Concomitant with this has been an increase in those placed in permanent housing with over 11,000 persons housed since 2012.

One-quarter of those experiencing homelessness were classified using the HUD definition as being chronically homeless. This is much higher than what was found in 2016 but the definition changed and this led to the higher number. Characteristics of those experiencing homelessness were younger age for sheltered (16.9% under age 18 and another 6.6% ages 18-24 years) but older age for unsheltered persons (94% over age 24). More males than females were found, especially among the unsheltered. Equal numbers of white and Black/African-Americans were found in both sheltered and unsheltered populations. High rates of substance abuse and mental illness were found in both populations. The number of military veterans experiencing

## Changes in PIT Count, 2011-2017 and Permanent Housing Placements, 2012-2017



**Figure 14**

homelessness decreased by 25% from 2016 with 405 veterans enumerated. Among unsheltered veterans, 21% were not eligible for VA benefits.

We were able to collect additional information on the unsheltered homeless. Educational status was relatively high with three out of five with a high school diploma/GED or college education. Most had no source of income although one out of five mentioned panhandling for income. One out of five was observed by the interviewer as panhandling. Eight-five percent were not working.

Similar PIT Count methodologies were used from 2011-2015, allowing for direct comparisons between those years; however, the unsheltered count methodology was modified last year. While this makes comparisons for 2016 with previous years less reliable, our findings are consistent in showing a linear decrease in those experiencing homelessness happening at the same time as people are being placed in permanent housing. These findings provide evidence that the number of those experiencing homelessness is being addressed and reduced and that the focus on housing vulnerable and chronically homeless individuals is helping reduce the

number of those experiencing homelessness in Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County. In 2017, Montgomery County was added to the geographic region covered by the CoC and therefore, the PIT Count. This addition to the area to be counted means that this year's Count will serve as a baseline for comparisons for the total area going forward.