Houston/Harris County/ Fort Bend County Point-in-Time Enumeration 2014

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 30 January 2014. 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 and unsheltered 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 City of Houston Department of Health and Human Services. Many homeless services providers participated as well as community volunteers, including homeless and formerly homeless persons.

The 2014 count enumerated individuals staying in a total of 61 shelters including emergency shelters (n=17), transitional housing units (n=43), and one safe haven on the night of 30 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 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 Specialized Outreach Teams comprised of homeless outreach 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 2014 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

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subsequent years' counts. 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 include use of ten staging areas, an increase of four 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 homeless individuals. In 2011-13, practice counts were held one week before the actual count but by 2014, this was no longer needed. Training, however, was held prior to the count to allow 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 in the composition and function of teams that counted unsheltered homeless individuals. Volunteer teams included homeless and formerly homeless individuals who could guide teams to locations where homeless individuals are likely to be found. The use of Specialized Outreach Teams to canvass areas not readily seen by teams driving by resulted in fewer unsheltered homeless persons remaining undetected. On the night of the count, "SWAT" teams were formed with HDHHS personnel familiar with working with those experiencing homelessness. 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 Homeless Management Information System. Secondly, 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 Point in Time count. Shelters that do not use HMIS such as domestic violence shelters were asked to report using the housing inventory chart and were encouraged to return that form for the night of the PIT and follow-up calls were made to ensure they were received. In 2010, only 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 2011-2014 counts, due to this increased effort, 100%

of entities defined by HUD as housing homeless individuals for the purposes of the Point-in-Time count reported their numbers.

The 2014 PIT Count included a modified effort, based on the 2013 YouthCounts! Initiative, to enumerate emancipated youth ages 24 and younger who have not been optimally counted in previous years. This was done by sending volunteer teams to places where youth were known to congregate (such as the downtown library and areas near the University of Houston downtown). Specialized Youth Outreach teams were also deployed during the count.

2014 PIT Count Key Findings

Data collected show a total of 5,351 sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals (per HUD's definition) in the Houston/Harris County/Ft. Bend region on the night of 30 January 2014 (Figure 1). Of these, 155 (2.9%) were counted in Ft. Bend county, an increase over last year's percent of 0.4. Of the total number of homeless persons, 2,291 (43%) were unsheltered. The combined population of Harris and Ft. Bend counties, according to the 2010 census, was 4,677,834 This puts the percent of homeless individuals within these two counties at 0.11% or 1 out of every 910 residents.
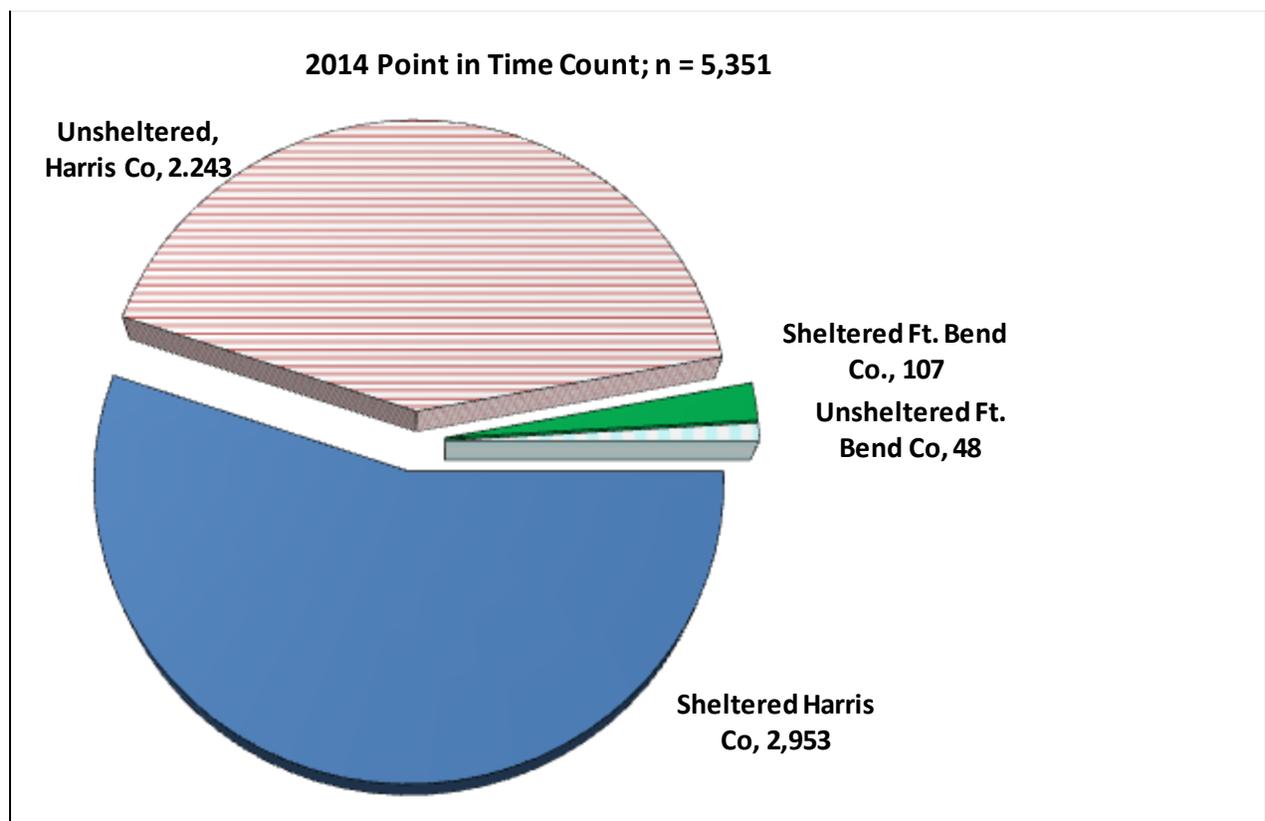

Figure 1

Comparison between 2014 and 2011-2013 PIT Counts

Findings from the last four 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 2014 PIT count of 5,351 homeless persons showed a decrease of 3,187 persons from that found in 2011. This corresponds to a 37% decrease compared to the 2011 count and a 16% decrease in homeless individuals counted compared to the 2013 PIT count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals. The decrease seen is encouraging and while the precise magnitude cannot be determined, the level and trend of the decrease does provide evidence that there are fewer persons experiencing homelessness in the Houston/Harris County/Ft. Bend County area over the past three years.

In 2014, 2,291 of those experiencing homelessness (43% of the total) were found on the streets or in places not meant for habitation compared to 2,978 (47%) in 2013, 3,824 (52%) in 2012 and 4,418 (52%) in 2011. This also is an encouraging trend and may reflect successes of the 100,000 Homes campaign to house chronically homeless individuals.
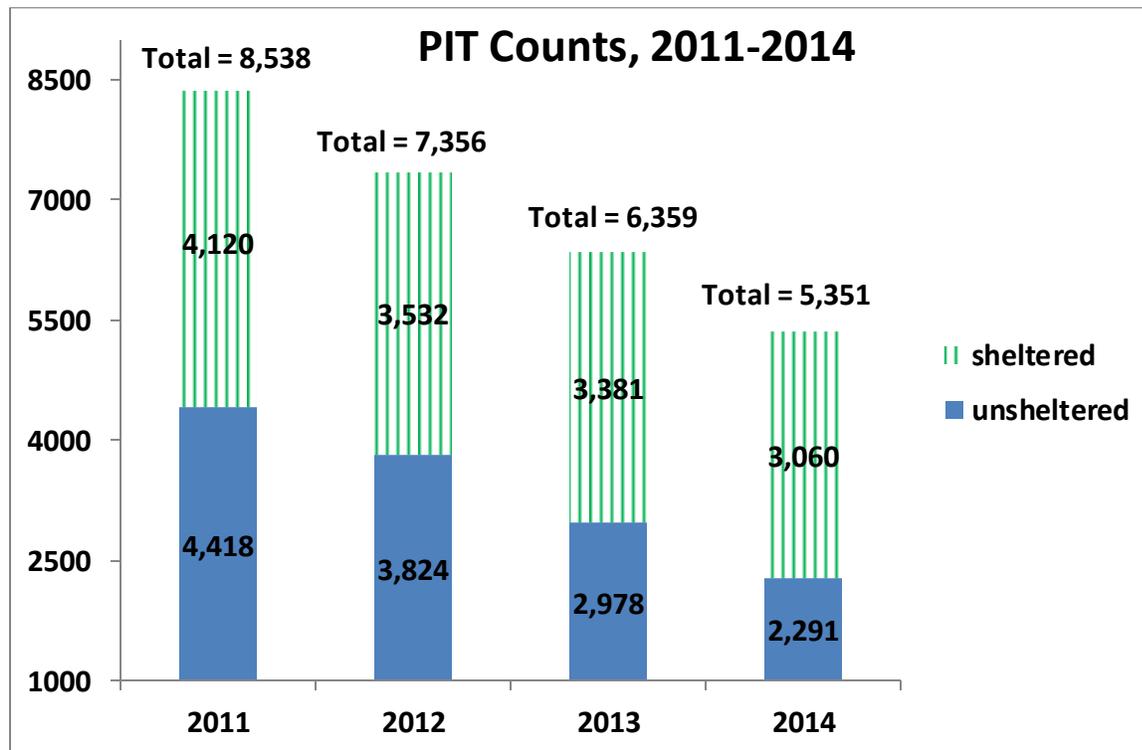

Figure 2

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 HUD in the Homeless Data Exchange. 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 therefore likely to be so after release). When these numbers are added to the 2014 PIT Count (Figure 3), the total number of homeless individuals in the region is 6,876 with the largest percentage sheltered (45%).

A comparison was made using this expanded definition of homelessness between 2011 and 2014 (Figure 4). In 2011, 11,152 individuals were deemed to be homeless using the expanded definition. The 2014 finding of 6,876 represents a 38% decrease or 4,276 fewer people in the total number of those counted experiencing homelessness since 2011, 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 a general trend over the past three years.
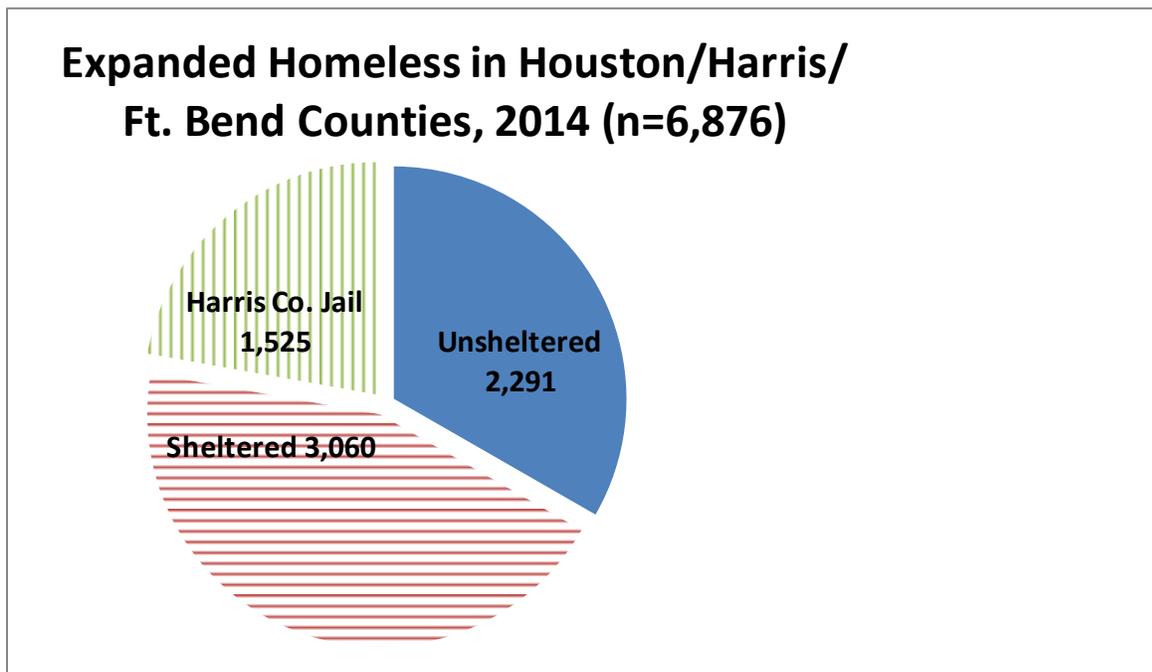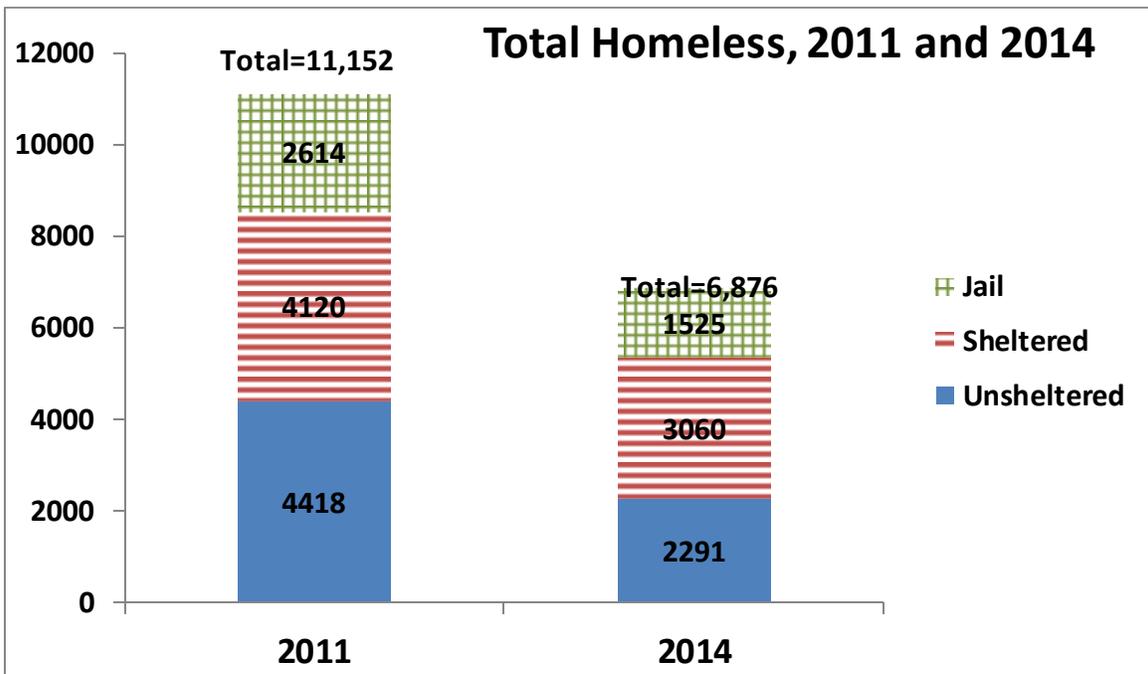

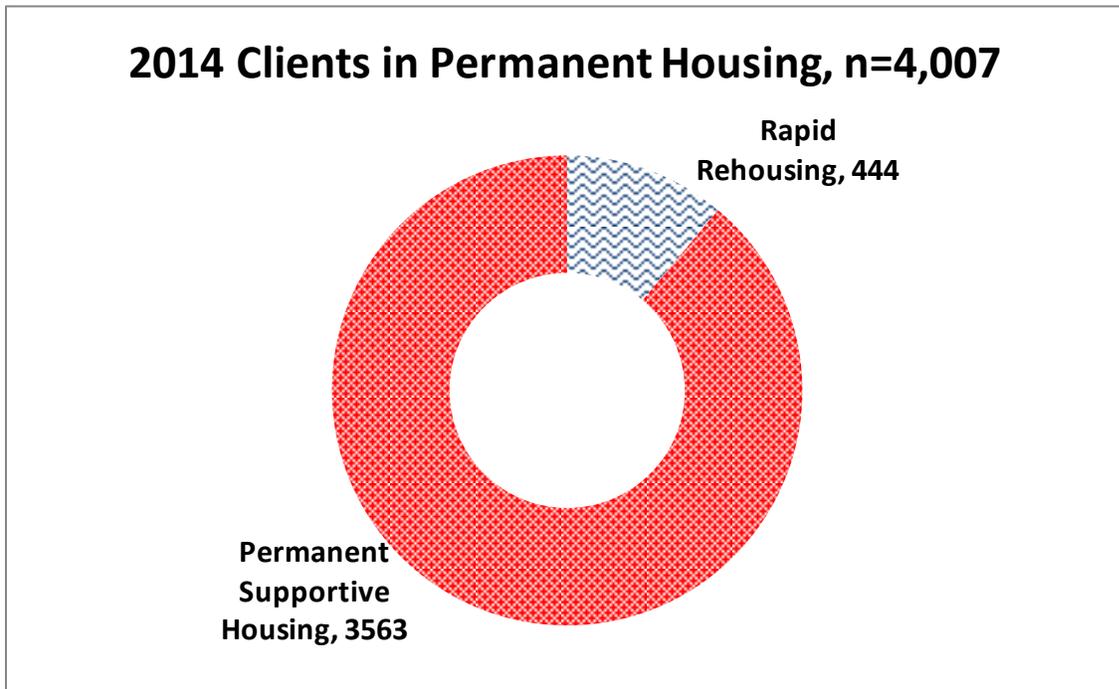**Expanded Homeless in Houston/Harris/ Ft. Bend Counties, 2014 (n=6,876)**

Harris Co. Jail 1,525

Unsheltered 2,291

Sheltered 3,060

Figure 3

Total Homeless, 2011 and 2014

Total=11,152

2614

4120

4418

Total=6,876

1525

3060

2291

Jail

Sheltered

Unsheltered

2011

2014

Figure 4

10492

2014 Clients in Permanent Housing, n=4,007

Rapid Rehousing, 444

Permanent Supportive Housing, 3563

Figure 5

Clients in Permanent Housing, 2011-2014

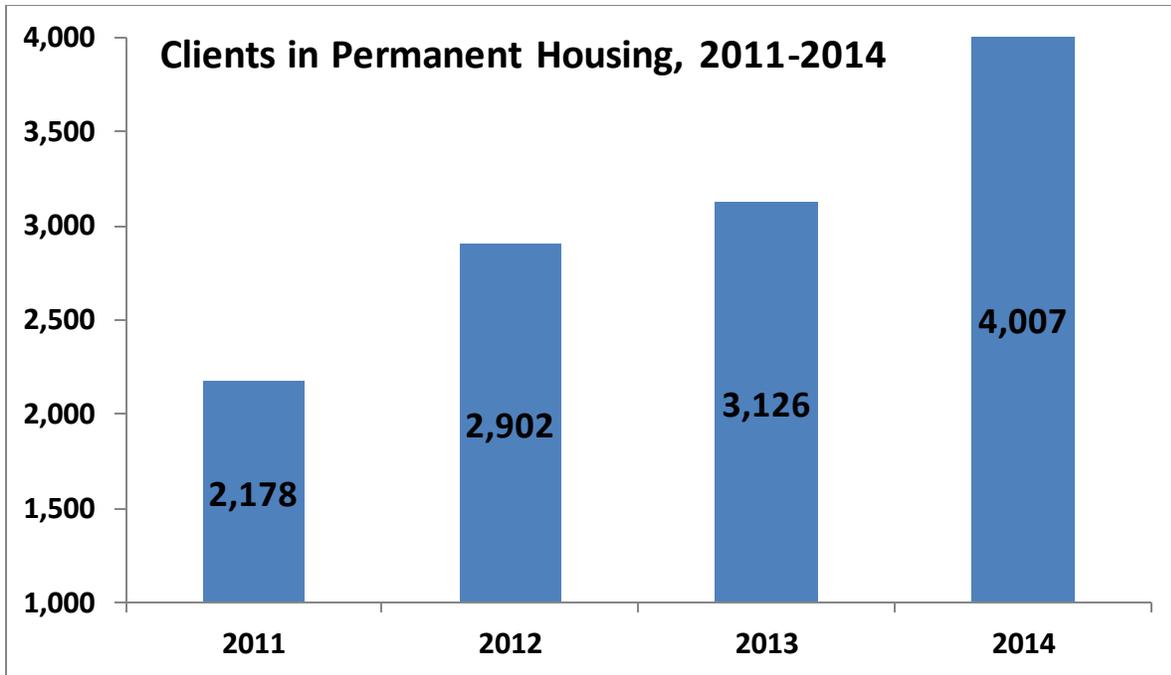| Year	Value
2011	2,178
2012	2,902
2013	3,126
2014	4,007

Figure 6

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 housing from 2013-2014. Permanent housing consists of Rapid Rehousing (RRH) and Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH). The majority of clients (89%) were in PSH (Figure 5). Figure 6 shows a comparison of the number of clients in permanent housing from 2011 through 2014, an increase of 81% over the three years (1,829 additional individuals housed) and 28% over the past year. Again, this represents success of targeting vulnerable and chronically homeless individuals first for PSH in Houston.

Characteristics of Those Experiencing Homelessness

HUD requires that certain subpopulations of persons experiencing homelessness 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 experience chronic substance use

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[1] HUD's definition of chronic homelessness 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). For sheltered individuals, they must be staying in emergency shelter or safe haven, but not in transitional housing .

disorder. This information can be captured by the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) for those in shelters (although only those answering positively to a question are counted and so we can't 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 determine subpopulation demographics on those who are unsheltered the night of the count due to the observational method employed. Therefore, surveys to determine these subpopulations were administered to a total of 324 clients the night of count by the Specialized Outreach Teams and those canvasing youth and the following morning at agencies providing meals or day services to the homeless community 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. Figure 7 shows results for the total homeless population surveyed as well as a breakdown of sheltered and unsheltered status.

There was an overall 22% reduction of homeless veterans from 877 in 2013 to 681 in 2014. Among those experiencing unsheltered homelessness on the night of January 30, 2014, 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%, although not significantly different from the 2013 percent (see below for discussion of this). Roughly two thirds of homeless persons reporting veteran status in the unsheltered survey had other than an honorable discharge and are most likely not eligible for Veteran's Affairs benefits or housing programs.

Among the total homeless population counted, approximately one in seven (15%) met the HUD definition of a chronically homeless individual with only two chronically homeless families identified. The 2014 count demonstrated a 33% decrease in chronically homeless individuals from 1185 in 2013 to 792 in 2014.

The age of individuals surveyed the night of and morning after the count was recorded for the unsheltered and the age range documented for the sheltered individuals. Of the unsheltered homeless population, the mean age of those interviewed was 46 years. Only one unsheltered child under the age of 18 was interviewed and only 62 unsheltered homeless youth were observed the night of the count (3%, 52 males and 10 females). This number was almost one in three (30%) of the sheltered homeless population, although two out of three children were in transitional housing, not emergency shelters. There were 18 (0.6%) unaccompanied children under the age of 18 sleeping in the shelters.

Other subpopulations reported among adults include more than one in three (35%) with severe mental illness or substance abuse disorder (39%). One in fifty (2%) reported as HIV positive and one in three (34%) had experienced domestic violence.
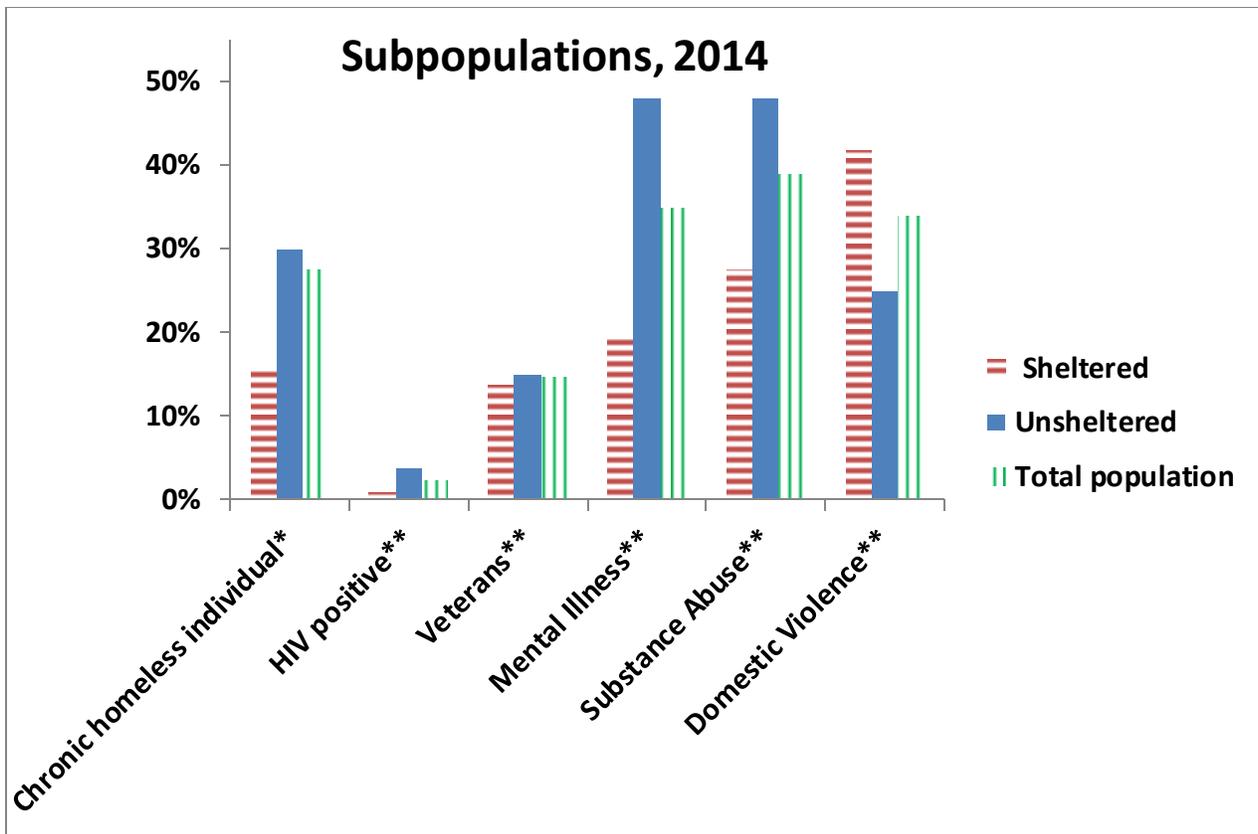
Figure 7

* only sheltered individuals in emergency shelters can be considered chronically homeless
** among adults only

Among those in emergency shelters on the night of the PIT count, approximately one out of every twenty-five adults (4%) was classified as a chronically homeless individual. Only two chronically homeless families were identified. Among the unsheltered population, 30% of adults were chronically homeless and 0% of unsheltered families were chronically homeless. As expected, both the percent with mental illness and those with chronic substance abuse disorder were higher among unsheltered individuals than sheltered individuals (48% vs. 19% and 48% vs. 28%). The percent of individuals who had experienced domestic violence were higher among those who were sheltered; this may be due to the availability of dedicated beds for this subpopulation.

Data from the surveys administered to a representative sample of unsheltered homeless persons could further be analyzed by comparing those who are chronically homeless (per HUD's definition) and those who are not. This comparison is shown in Figure 8. Not surprisingly, a higher percentage of chronically homeless individuals had evidence of substance abuse and mental illness. Rates of domestic violence were lower among chronically homeless individuals and this may represent the availability of dedicated shelter beds. Self-reported HIV positivity was not different between chronically homeless and non-chronic individuals. Veteran status was slightly higher among the chronically homeless population.
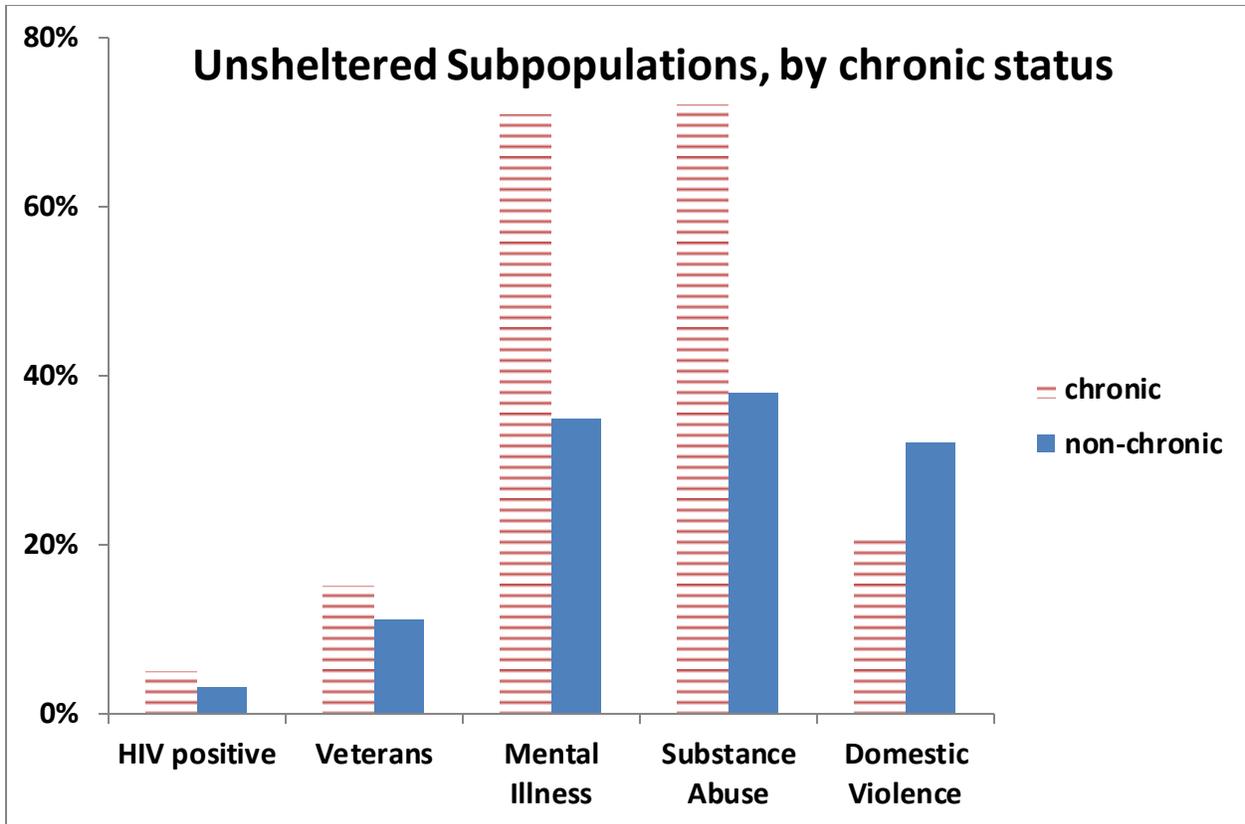
Unsheltered Subpopulations, by chronic status

Figure 8

As shown in Figure 9, a significant proportion (two out of three) of the military veterans who were unsheltered the night of the PIT count did not receive an honorable/general discharge and, therefore, are ineligible for veteran benefits. If only the veterans eligible for benefits are included, the percent of veterans in the unsheltered population drops to 9.2%. A much larger proportion of sheltered homeless veterans received an honorable/general discharge
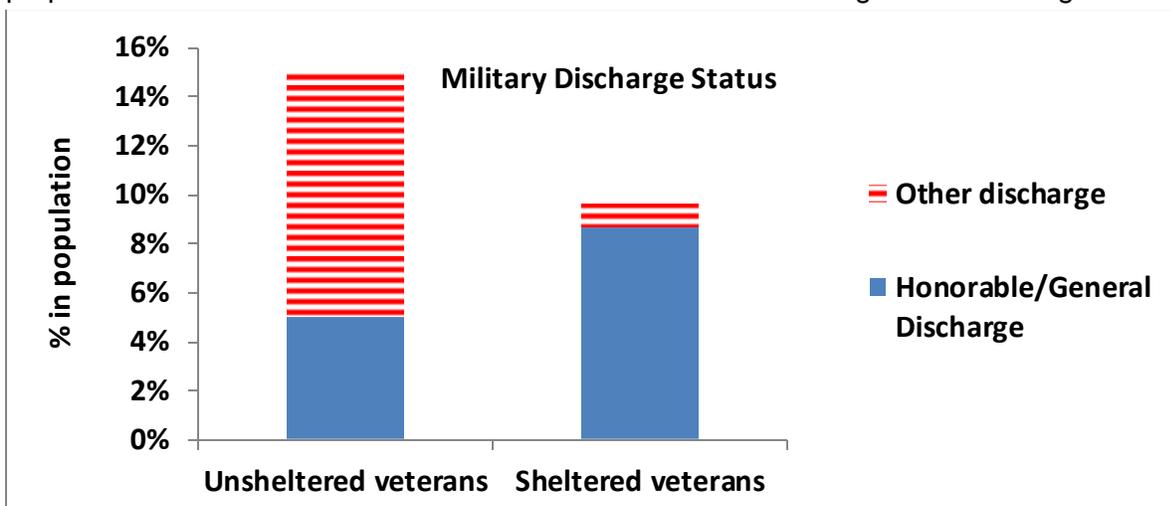

Figure 9

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 used again in 2014. The enumeration was held on the night of 30 January. A total of 5,351 persons experiencing homeless were counted with 2,291 (43%) unsheltered homeless individuals (staying in a place not meant for human habitation) and 3,060 (57%) staying in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or safe haven that evening. Most of these individuals were found in Harris County (97%). An expanded definition of homelessness led to a total count of 6,876 individuals.

The 2014 PIT count represents a 16% decrease in the number of homeless individuals counted compared to the number counted in January 2013 and a 37% compared to the number counted in January 2011 (Figure 10). Concomitant with this has been an increase in those in permanent housing (28% over the past year and 81% over the three year period). The use of similar methodologies would have eliminated artificial variations due to differences in how we count those experiencing homelessness. 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 homeless in Houston/Harris County/Ft. Bend County. However, while these numbers are encouraging, 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.
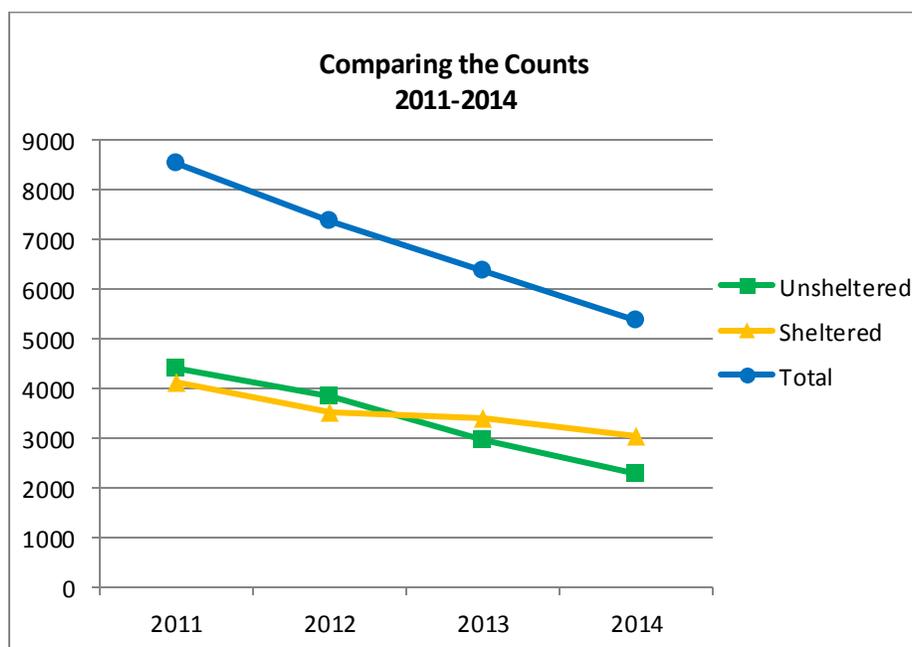

Figure 10