

The Way Home Continuum of Care 2021 Point-In-Time Homeless Count & Survey Independent Analysis



The Way Home

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March 2021

Overview

In 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Continuums of Care (CoCs) across the nation were faced with the possibility that conducting a count of those experiencing unsheltered homelessness would not be feasible. Conducting the annual January count of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness requires hundreds of community volunteers. Additionally, volunteers gather in groups and approach people that may be experiencing homelessness to collect data. This activity poses challenges in preventing the spread of COVID-19. Due to these challenges, U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD) issued waivers that allowed CoCs to opt out of conducting an unsheltered homeless count. For those that chose to move forward with the count, there were additional waivers which provided flexibilities in methodology and timing of the Count.

The Way Home Continuum of Care, which encompasses the cities of Houston, Pasadena, and Conroe, and Fort Bend, Harris, and Montgomery Counties, decided to move forward with conducting both the sheltered and unsheltered Count for several reasons:

1. To assess how COVID-19 has impacted homelessness,
2. To measure the progress of our projects, including the Community COVID Housing Program, and
3. To convey to the most vulnerable that we care and are still fighting to end their homelessness.



Methodology

In previous years, the unsheltered Count occurred over a three-day period during the last 10 days of January. Community volunteers were recruited to participate alongside agency staff. All participants were assigned to specific geographic regions and Count teams. Everyone would meet at staging locations each morning of the Count and receive laminated maps for the regions that were assigned. Teams would then conduct surveys in their assigned regions.

For 2021, safety precautions were implemented due to the pandemic. HUD granted a waiver that allowed for the unsheltered count to occur during the last 13 days of January. Community volunteers were not recruited for the Count. Only outreach teams and staff cleared by agency leadership were allowed to participate. No staging locations or teams were used to ensure that everyone practiced social distancing. Participants were allowed to select the region(s) of their preference and the maps for those regions were sent directly to the Counting Us app on their phones; no physical maps were used. Finally, the unsheltered Count was conducted over ten days instead of three to allow for more time to cover the three-county area with fewer volunteers. Due to these changes in methodology for the count, previous years' counts are not comparable.

The official “night of record” for the sheltered Count & HUD was Jan. 19, 2021. The unsheltered Count occurred Jan. 20-29, 2021, with 189 volunteers. Prior to the Count, five Homeless Count Trainings were provided on three different days: Jan. 15, 18, & 19.

The Way Home CoC covers a vast geographic region (3,711 sq. miles, including all of Houston, Pasadena, Conroe, 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 and complications

related to pandemic concerns, we know that not all unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness could be identified in a short period of time. (We are more confident about counting the number of those experiencing homelessness who are sheltered.)

The 2021 sheltered Count included individuals staying in a total of 58 projects comprising emergency shelters (33 different projects), transitional housing units (24 different projects), and safe havens (1 project) on the night of 19 January based on reports received from the projects and data entered into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness (those sleeping on the streets or in other places not meant for human habitation) were counted using direct engagement and interviews when possible, and observation, if not. Teams walked under bridges, along the bayous, and to other areas where encampments of unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness had been identified. They also investigated abandoned buildings where persons experiencing homelessness may have been residing.

There is a danger of counting people twice or mistaking them as unsheltered when counting over multiple days, as someone on the street during the day may have been in a shelter the night before or approached twice during the ten-day period. We guarded against this in several ways:

- 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 19 January 2021 (the official night of the Count) and were classified as experiencing unsheltered homelessness 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.
- When reviewing data from the Count, a search for potential duplicate entries was performed and, if found, the duplicate entry is deleted. This year, one case of duplication was found.
- Names of unsheltered interviewees were compared to HMIS records to ensure they were not counted during the sheltered Count.



SimTech Solutions' Counting Us software (Canton, MA), a mobile application that can be readily implemented to help count persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness, was used for the Count. The use of a mobile application survey had several advantages. All individuals and families who were identified as experiencing chronic homelessness, young adults (18-24 years), or veterans were assessed for housing & documented for follow-up by trained Coordinated Access Assessors. Thanks to GPS mapping technology included in the mobile application, the Count execution and data could be monitored in real-time, and location of the interview recorded. Volunteers could be tracked while conducting surveys based on the user IDs assigned.

The enhanced methodology developed in previous years for the sheltered Count was continued in 2021. All emergency shelters, transitional housing, and safe havens that are part of the CoC were contacted and inventoried. Shelter providers were trained on entering data and assessments into HMIS and given the opportunity to confirm the data assessed on the night of the Count. Shelters that do not use HMIS, such as domestic violence shelters, were asked to report their numbers on 19 January using the Housing Inventory Count.

2021 Key Findings

**Total Number of those Experiencing Homelessness
in 2021 by Interview Location, N = 3,055**

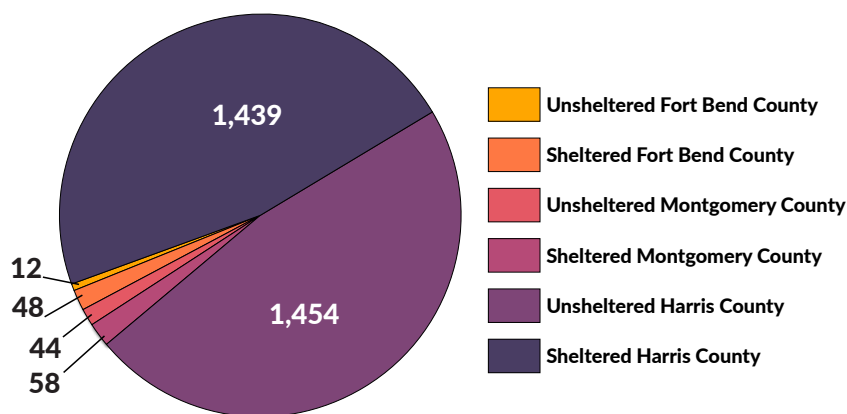


Figure 1

Data collected show a total of 3,055 sheltered and unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness (per HUD's definition¹) in the Houston/Pasadena/Conroe/Harris County/Fort Bend County/Montgomery County region on the night of the Count (Figure 1). Breaking down the location of those experiencing homelessness, we determined that most were in Houston/Harris County with only one out of every thirty-three (3%) counted in Fort Bend County while approximately one out of 26 persons experiencing homelessness in the total CoC area were found in Montgomery County (3.8%). It is important to note that, for those experiencing unsheltered homelessness on the night of 19 January, geographical assignment

1 For the Count, we defined homelessness as anyone in category 1 or 4 per HUD's definition: (1) Individuals and families who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and includes a subset for an individual who is exiting an institution where he or she resided for 90 days or less and who resided in an emergency shelter or a place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering that institution; or (4) Individuals and families who are fleeing, or are attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or a family member. <https://www.hud.gov/sites/documents/PIH2013-15HOMELESSQAS.PDF>

was determined by where they were interviewed during the day, which may be near where they seek services but not necessarily where they sleep. The same is true of the sheltered population which may move from one county to another, particularly in counties where there are a lack of shelters for specific groups. For example, there are no shelters for single adults in Ft. Bend County. Therefore, the location of both the unsheltered and sheltered populations may not reflect where they were living before experiencing homelessness. **Due to the pandemic and differences in the methodology of conducting the Count, previous years' counts are not comparable. However, these results do give us a snapshot, however incomplete, of what is happening in the area.**

Persons experiencing homelessness can be found in one of four settings – places not meant for human habitation (i.e., unsheltered), emergency shelters, transitional housing, or safe havens. The locations of those experiencing homelessness by county in 2021 are shown in Figure 2. Within the total population, more than one out of every three persons experiencing homelessness (36%) were in emergency shelters on the night of the Count, with 15% in transitional housing.

In 2021, 49% of those experiencing homelessness, or approximately half, were found on the streets or in places not meant for human habitation (Figure 3).

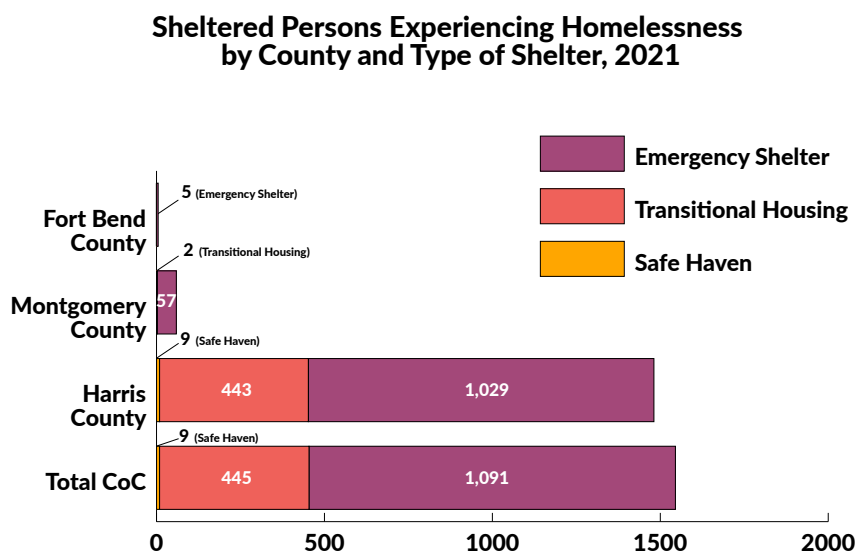


Figure 2

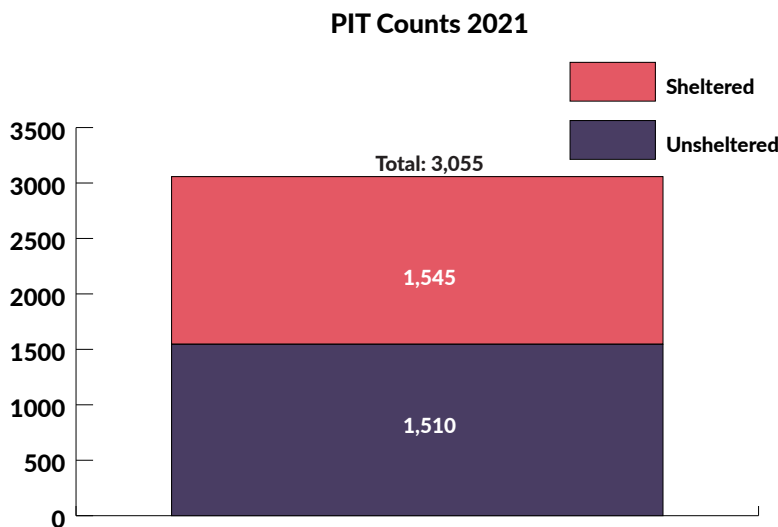


Figure 3

Characteristics of Those Experiencing Homelessness

Family Type in Sheltered and Unsheltered Populations, 2021

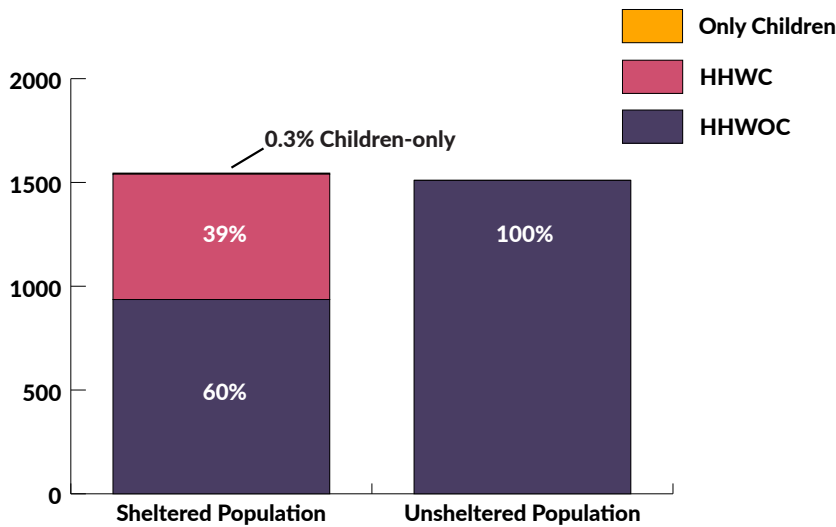


Figure 4

Number of Persons by Household Type and Shelter Type, 2021

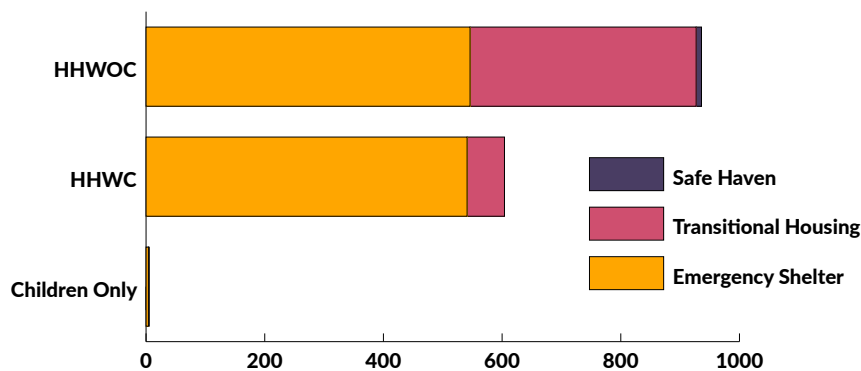


Figure 5

Persons experiencing homeless are classified into three household types: persons in households without children (HHWOC), persons in households with children under age 18 years (HHWC), and children-only households (under the age of 18 years). Figure 4 shows the breakdown of these groups between the sheltered and unsheltered populations while Figure 5 graphs these data in a way to show among each household type, what number/percent were in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and safe haven. Approximately two of five (39%) of sheltered persons were in households with children while, among the unsheltered, no households with children were found. Five children-only households were found among the sheltered with four in emergency shelter and one in transitional housing.

For the unsheltered population, we were able to capture length of time of homelessness as well as how long they had lived in the area (Figures 6 and 7). A plurality of unsheltered persons had been homeless for three years or longer and two out of five persons had been in the community in which they were interviewed for three years or longer.

Time Experiencing Homelessness, 2021

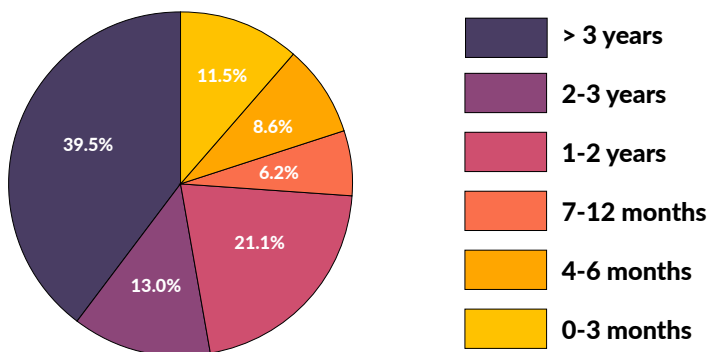


Figure 6

Time Since Arriving in Area, 2021

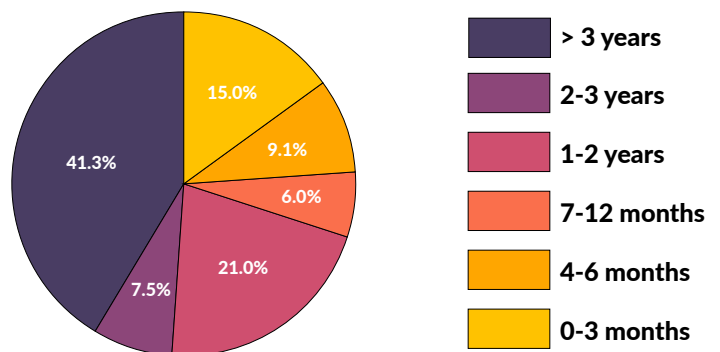


Figure 7

For approximately one out of five unsheltered persons, this was their first time experiencing homelessness. One out of seven (14%) unsheltered persons were homeless due to a natural disaster with four of five of them citing Hurricane Harvey or another hurricane as the reason. Other natural disasters mentioned were fire, mud, or flooding. Approximately one of seven persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness indicated they were homeless due to the SARS-CoV 2 pandemic with the vast majority citing loss of job or reduction in hours and/or eviction as the precipitating event.

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Subpopulations

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

- Veterans
- Individuals and families experiencing chronic homelessness²
- Individuals who are survivors of domestic violence
- Persons with HIV/AIDS
- Persons with serious mental illness
- Individuals experiencing chronic substance use disorder (alcohol and/or drugs)
- Unaccompanied young adults and parenting young adults

This information can be captured by HMIS for those in shelters. If data were missing, it was assumed to be negative. This may have the effect of artificially lowering percentages in a characteristic category as some of the persons with missing answers may truly have had that characteristic.

It is more difficult to get this information on the unsheltered population as these characteristics cannot be determined by observation. When an interviewer counted a person experiencing homelessness, they either administered the questions or did an observational tally which was captured in the database. This year there were 649 interviews, which means that less than half (43%) of the total number of persons counted experiencing unsheltered homelessness were interviewed. The number of persons living unsheltered and exhibiting a particular demographic characteristic (other than location, age range, race, and ethnicity, which were captured on everyone) was extrapolated by determining the number answering yes to a question and dividing it by the total answering that question to get a percent positive. This percent was then applied to the whole unsheltered population to estimate how many people in the “observed” tally exhibit that characteristic. However, it is important to note that data was not complete on all 649 persons who were surveyed; many people did not answer every question, and some responded “don’t know” or refused to answer. In addition, information collected was based on self-reporting and so may not represent the true proportions in the population experiencing homelessness. There is potential over-reporting in some categories (e.g., veterans) or underreporting due to fear of stigmatization in others (e.g., HIV/AIDS, mental illness, substance use disorder).

² HUD’s definition of chronic homelessness is four or more occasions 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.

Age Distribution of Total Population Experiencing Homelessness, 2021

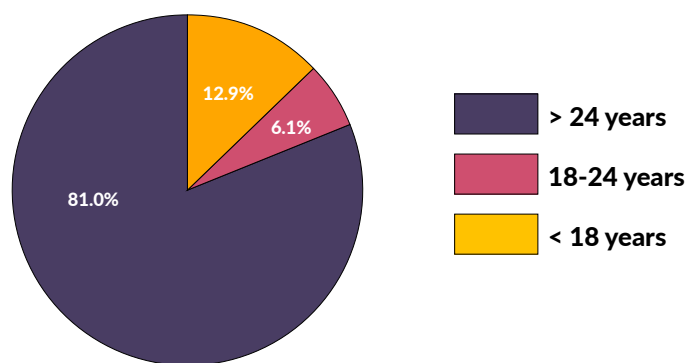


Figure 8a

Age Distribution of Unsheltered Population Experiencing Homelessness, 2021

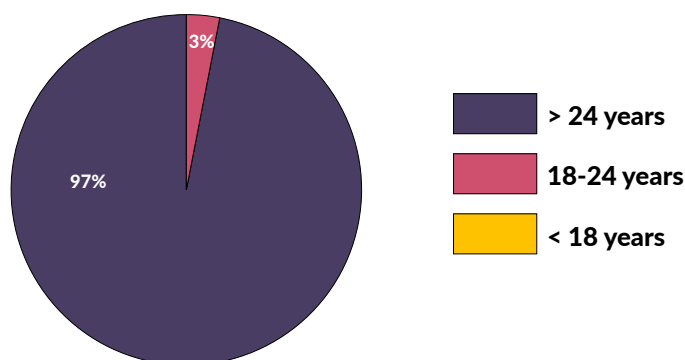


Figure 8b

Age Distribution of Sheltered Population Experiencing Homelessness, 2021

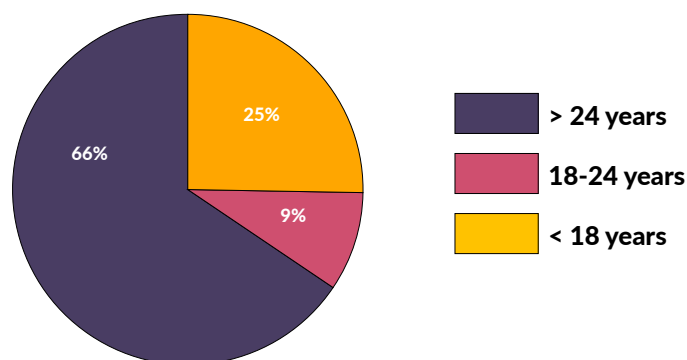


Figure 8c

The age range of the total population experiencing homelessness and by sheltered or unsheltered status is shown in Figures 8a-c. In the total population, over four out of five persons experiencing homelessness were over the age of 24. Approximately one out of eight were under the age of 18; however, all of those under age 18 were in sheltered situations. The population living unsheltered was older with forty-nine out of fifty (97%) 25 years of age or older. The sheltered population experiencing homelessness was younger, due to the inclusion of children in that population. Of the 1,545 persons in safe haven, emergency shelter, or transitional housing, one of four (26%) was below the age of 18 years and one out of 11 (9%) ages 18-24 years. Approximately one out of ten (9.5%) of those under age 18 were in transitional housing.

Subpopulations for the total population experiencing homelessness as well as a breakdown by sheltered and unsheltered status are shown in Figures 9 and 10. Overall, over three out of five persons in the total population experiencing homeless were male with a higher percentage in the unsheltered population (81%). Four persons experiencing homelessness identified as transgender and one as non-binary.

Persons who are experiencing chronic homelessness represent a particularly vulnerable population and are prioritized for permanent housing. We determined that nearly one out of five (18%)

of the total population experiencing homelessness met the HUD definition of experiencing chronic homelessness.³ There was a slightly higher percent of chronically homeless individuals among the unsheltered (23%).

Another subpopulation of particular interest are Veterans. This year we found 182 Veterans with approximately one-third (37%) in a sheltered condition. Of these 182 Veterans, approximately three out of ten (29%) were classified as experiencing chronic homelessness and of these, three out of four were unsheltered (73%). Gap analysis and take down targeting have been predicting an annual steady state volume of between 1,200 and 1,400 homeless Veterans based on opposing actions of successful housing efforts versus returning Veterans and those falling temporarily back into homelessness. Our findings this year are still well below that number. Regardless, The Way Home CoC has a housing option for any Veteran, no matter the discharge status.

Other subpopulations reported in the total adult population experiencing homelessness include almost two out of five with self-reported serious mental illness (38%) and one of four reporting substance use disorder (28%; alcohol and/or other drugs). These conditions are self-reported, however, and may be artificially low as persons may not want to disclose their condition due to stigma.

Approximately one in thirty-three (3%) of the total population experiencing homelessness self-reported as HIV positive although the true percentage may be higher since many may not have been tested and therefore do not know their status or do know their status but do not want to share that information due to stigma. Overall, approximately one in seven (15%) of those experiencing homelessness had experienced domestic violence. This percent was higher in the sheltered population (26% vs 6% among unsheltered), which makes sense because there are shelter beds specifically dedicated to survivors of domestic violence. Additionally, the majority of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness are men, and men are less likely to report domestic violence as the cause of their homelessness.

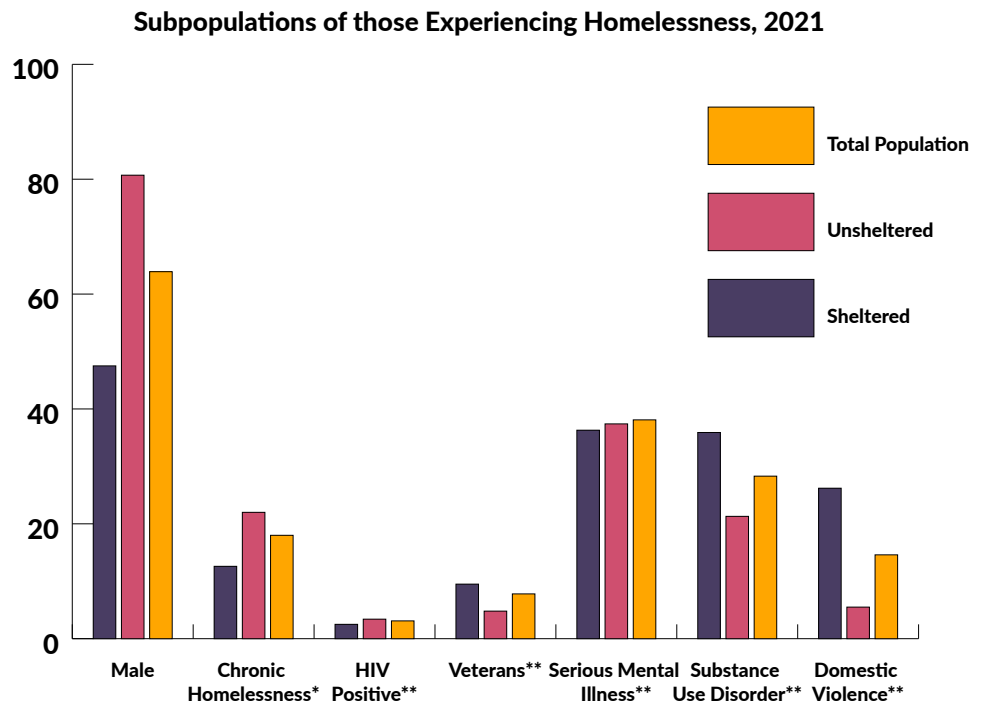


Figure 9
 * of the sheltered population, only those in emergency shelters can meet the definition of chronic homelessness
 ** asked for adults only

3 Persons in transitional housing cannot be considered chronically homeless.

Racial/Ethnic Breakdown of those Experiencing Homelessness, 2021

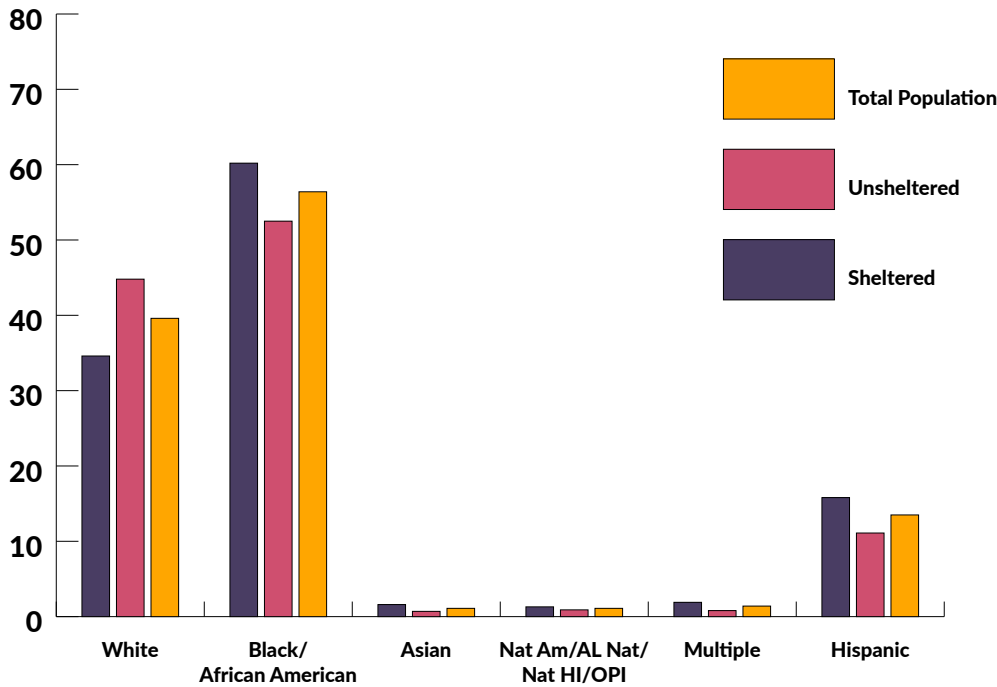


Figure 10

Figure 10 shows the racial and ethnic self-classification. Among the unsheltered population, the observer classified the racial/ethnic group of individuals who could not be interviewed. The vast majority of those experiencing homelessness were Black/African American (56%) or white (40%). A higher percentage of whites were found in the unsheltered population than in the sheltered population. Persons interviewed were asked if they considered themselves Hispanic and approximately one in seven did.

Finally, Figure 11 shows the number of sheltered and unsheltered young adults (ages 18-24 years) experiencing homelessness. These are further divided into unaccompanied young adults and parenting young adults. All parenting young adults were sheltered, with 30 children under the age of 18 years in these parenting young adult households. Of the 102 unaccompanied young adults (18-24 years) who were in emergency shelter, nine (9%) were classified as chronically homeless while 4 out of 47 unsheltered unaccompanied young adults were so classified (8.5%).

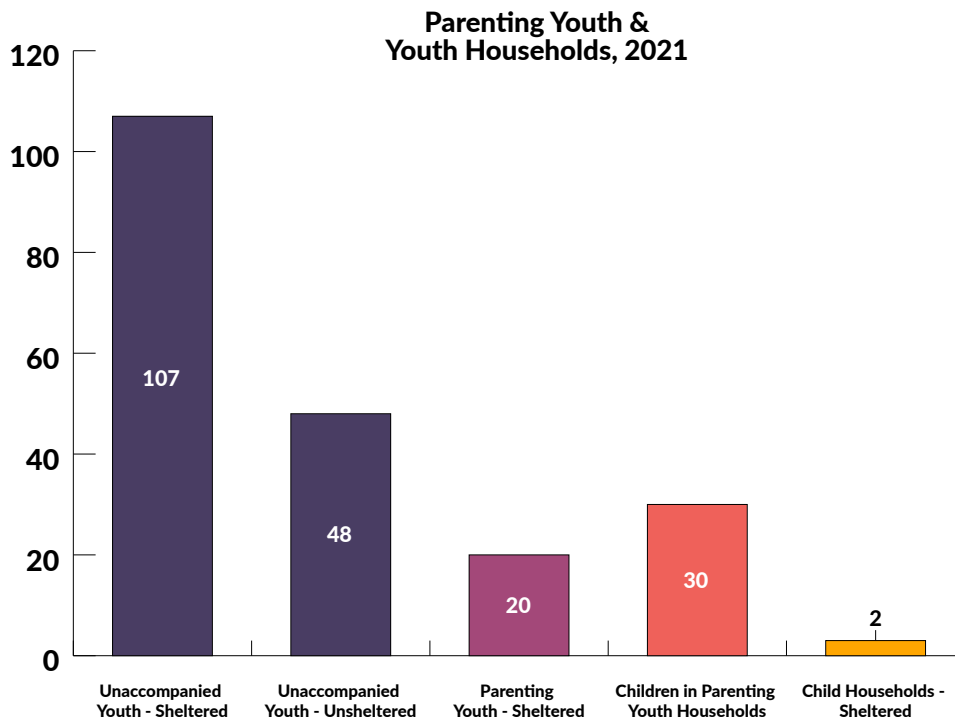


Figure 11

Discussion

A total of 3,055 persons experiencing homelessness were counted in Houston/Pasadena/Conroe/Harris County/Fort Bend County/Montgomery County during this modified Count, necessary because of the pandemic. Of those counted this year, 1,510 (49%) were unsheltered (staying in a place not meant for human habitation). Most of these individuals (95%) were interviewed in Harris County. However, it is important to note that the persons living unsheltered were classified where they were interviewed or spotted, which may not have been where they slept the night of the Count. Persons move around during the day and may congregate near services. Within the total CoC area, almost one in three were in emergency shelters. No children were counted among the unsheltered population, but 2 of every 5 persons in shelters were in households with children, with one in four of the total sheltered population under age 18.

Two out of every five unsheltered individuals had been homeless for three years or longer and the same percentage had been in the community in which they were interviewed for three years or longer. One out of seven unsheltered persons was homeless due to a natural disaster, most commonly Hurricane Harvey. Loss of job, reduction in hours, and/or eviction led to homelessness for one out of seven unsheltered persons enumerated this year.

Subpopulation analysis showed that nearly one out of five met the HUD definition of chronic homelessness, one out of eleven self-identified as a veteran, and high rates of serious mental illness (two out of five) and substance use disorder (three out of five) were found. A total of 187 young adults (18-24) were among those experiencing homelessness. Thirty children were found in parenting youth households, all in emergency shelter or transitional housing.

As seen with many other social determinants of health, there were major racial disparities among those experiencing homelessness. While Blacks/African Americans represent not quite 19% of the composition of the total population of Harris County, they comprised over 56% of those experiencing homelessness. This represents an issue that needs to be examined and addressed if homelessness is to be conquered in this area.

Due to the modified methodology used this year, we are not able to make comparisons with previous year's Counts, particularly those who are unsheltered. Although the sheltered count shows a decrease from last year (1,545 vs. 2,318), this may be due to limited availability of beds in the shelters because of the necessity of social distancing during the pandemic. In addition, persons experiencing homelessness may be reluctant to stay at a shelter due to fear of the virus.

The Way Home has been extremely successful in housing persons experiencing homelessness, especially those who are chronically homeless. The following table shows the numbers of those placed in permanent supportive housing (PSH) and Rapid Rehousing (RRH). Since 2012, 21,551 have been placed in either PSH or RRH.



Figure 12

Addressing the Pandemic

Early on in the pandemic, the Coalition for the Homeless worked with The Way Home partners, the City of Houston, and Harris County to implement strategies to help mitigate the effects of the pandemic on individuals experiencing homelessness. These strategies included:

- Distribution of thousands of pieces of PPE and hand sanitizer to outreach partners and individuals experiencing homelessness;
- Coordinating the distribution of over 24,000 meals for individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness;
- Coordinating the installation of 25 handwashing stations throughout Houston and Harris County;
- Setting up an auxiliary shelter so that existing shelters could decompress and make room for social distancing; and
- Setting up a COVID testing process as well as a Homeless Medical Isolation & Quarantine Facility.



The most important recommendation made by Coalition staff was that the best use of the CARES Act relief funding for people experiencing homelessness would be for permanent housing and evidence-based supportive services. Out of this recommendation, the Coalition worked with the City of Houston and Harris County to develop the Community COVID Housing Program (CCHP). For people experiencing homelessness, housing is healthcare. Because of underlying health conditions and lack of access to facilities, people experiencing homelessness are more susceptible to the Coronavirus than those who have a home, and if infected, the virus can be more deadly for them. The most effective public health response to reduce community spread of COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness and others is to ensure that all people experiencing homelessness have a safe, permanent home, where they can self-isolate or quarantine. Rapidly expanding access to housing will also improve healthcare outcomes and reduce reliance on expensive emergency services like hospital visits, thus decreasing the burden on the healthcare system and reducing costs.




The CCHP is helping not only those who were already experiencing homelessness but also those who may fall into homelessness as a result of the pandemic. The federal funding allocated by the City of Houston and Harris County for the CCHP has given our community an unprecedented opportunity to transform and accelerate the homeless response system, getting ahead of future demand for crisis housing services due to the economic impact of COVID-19. The CCHP will serve approximately 5,000 people experiencing homelessness over two years using the following primary interventions:

- A rapid rehousing “bridge” to permanent supportive housing for those experiencing chronic homelessness (who may currently be living in emergency shelters or on the streets, e.g., in encampments). This will involve providing them with housing (help finding a unit and rental assistance) until an existing permanent supportive housing unit becomes available for them, through regular turnover. In other words, The Way Home will house in one year the number of people it would usually be able to house in permanent supportive housing in two years because, rather than having to wait to house them until units with a permanent subsidy attached become available, agencies will be able to house people right away with a temporary subsidy (paid for by federal CARES funding) while they wait for a permanent subsidy.
- Rapid Re-housing for those who may fall into homelessness as a result of COVID, who do not require the same level of support services as those who are experiencing chronic homelessness. They are more likely to be able to “graduate” from receiving rental assistance to being able to support themselves.
- Diversion to help people immediately maintain or regain housing so that they do not have to experience literal homelessness.

The CCHP began on October 1, 2020. As of March 11, 2021, approximately 1,170 people had been housed through the CCHP, including almost 800 prior to the night of the Count. We are addressing racial equity through proportionally housing more African Americans (78%) than Hispanics and whites. The CCHP is expected to make a deep, and hopefully lasting, impact on homelessness in The Way Home CoC and it is likely that there are fewer unsheltered persons counted this year because of this program.



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