

# Houston/Harris County/Fort Bend County 2016 Point-In-Time Count Report



COALITION  
FOR THE  
HOMELESS  
*Leading Houston Home*

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Houston/Harris County for the Houston/Pasadena/Harris County/Fort Bend  
County Continuum of Care

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## Overview

A Point-In-Time (PIT) Count of sheltered and unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness in the Houston, Pasadena, Harris County, and Fort Bend County areas was conducted over a three day period from 26-28 January 2016. The purpose of the Count was 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 Houston, Pasadena, Harris County and Fort Bend County Continuum of Care (CoC) encompasses a vast geographic region (2,664 sq. miles with a large dispersed unsheltered population (2,072 in the 2015 PIT). 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; 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 UTHHealth School of Public Health and the City of Houston Health Department. Many homeless services providers participated as well as community volunteers, including homeless and formerly homeless persons.

The 2016 Count enumerated individuals staying in a total of 54 shelters including emergency shelters (n=23), transitional housing units (n=31), and safe havens (n=0) on the night of 25 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 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. Care was taken not to double count homeless individuals.

### **Changes from 2015 to 2016 in PIT Count Methodology**

Several significant changes were made in the methodology of the 2016 unsheltered count compared to the previous five years. In the past, the unsheltered PIT Count was an observational one, performed during a single night from the hours of approximately 5 to 11 pm. This year 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 since 2011, due to the community's success in housing individuals through Coordinated Access and Housing First strategies. There is a danger of counting people twice or mistaking them as unsheltered 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:

- 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 25 January 2016 (the night of record 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

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<sup>1</sup> We were not able to engage and interview those who refused, those who were sleeping, or those who it was physically impossible to reach (e.g., spotted across a highway).

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 Coalition for the Homeless along with academia (UTHealth School of Public Health) and a local health department [Houston Health Department (HHD)]. This included the use of over 250 surveyors recruited from the homeless provider community, outreach teams, and VA staff. The CoC drew on consumer volunteers (persons who had formerly or were currently experiencing homelessness) to provide expertise and guidance during the count in the capacity as “homeless guides”. “SWAT” teams were formed with HHD personnel familiar with working with those experiencing homelessness. These teams were available to be sent out to sectors that needed additional assistance identifying and counting homeless persons, thus assuring more complete coverage of all areas. We continued 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 who were not able to be interviewed were performed.

With approval from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the unsheltered count took place over three days, 26-28 January 2016, with the night of 25 January designated as the official date for the sheltered count, as well as the night of reference for the unsheltered count. The geographic area for the PIT was divided into 3 sections. On each day of the count, at least 50 volunteer teams canvassed the area designated for that day to interview unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness. Four Staging Area locations were set up each day of the count with a total of 20 Staging Area Captains and co-Captains.

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. In the past the survey tool

was a paper form, this year the survey was placed on 100 tablets. There were several advantages to this, including the ability to link to HMIS. All individuals and families who were identified as being chronically homeless, youth and young adults (24 years old or younger), and Veterans were assessed for housing on the spot by one of 20 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 to those conducting surveys.

The enhanced methodology developed for the sheltered count also was continued. All emergency shelters and transitional housing programs in the area, whether or not they were participating agencies in 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 using the Housing Inventory Chart (HIC) and were encouraged to return that form for the night of the PIT.

The following trainings were held before the 2016 PIT:

- The Coalition for the Homeless hosted a Case Manager Resource Exchange on 15 December 2015 dedicated to filling key positions for the PIT Count with members of the CoC provider and service network. A one-hour presentation on the new PIT Count methodology was conducted.
- Two volunteer trainings were conducted on 19 January 2016.
  - The first training was targeted at volunteers from partner 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 were able to practice entering information for each question on the tablet survey tool.

- The second training was targeted at 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 also trained on 19 January 2016. This training included the use and distribution of tablets, volunteer sign-in, distribution of maps, and map interpretation.

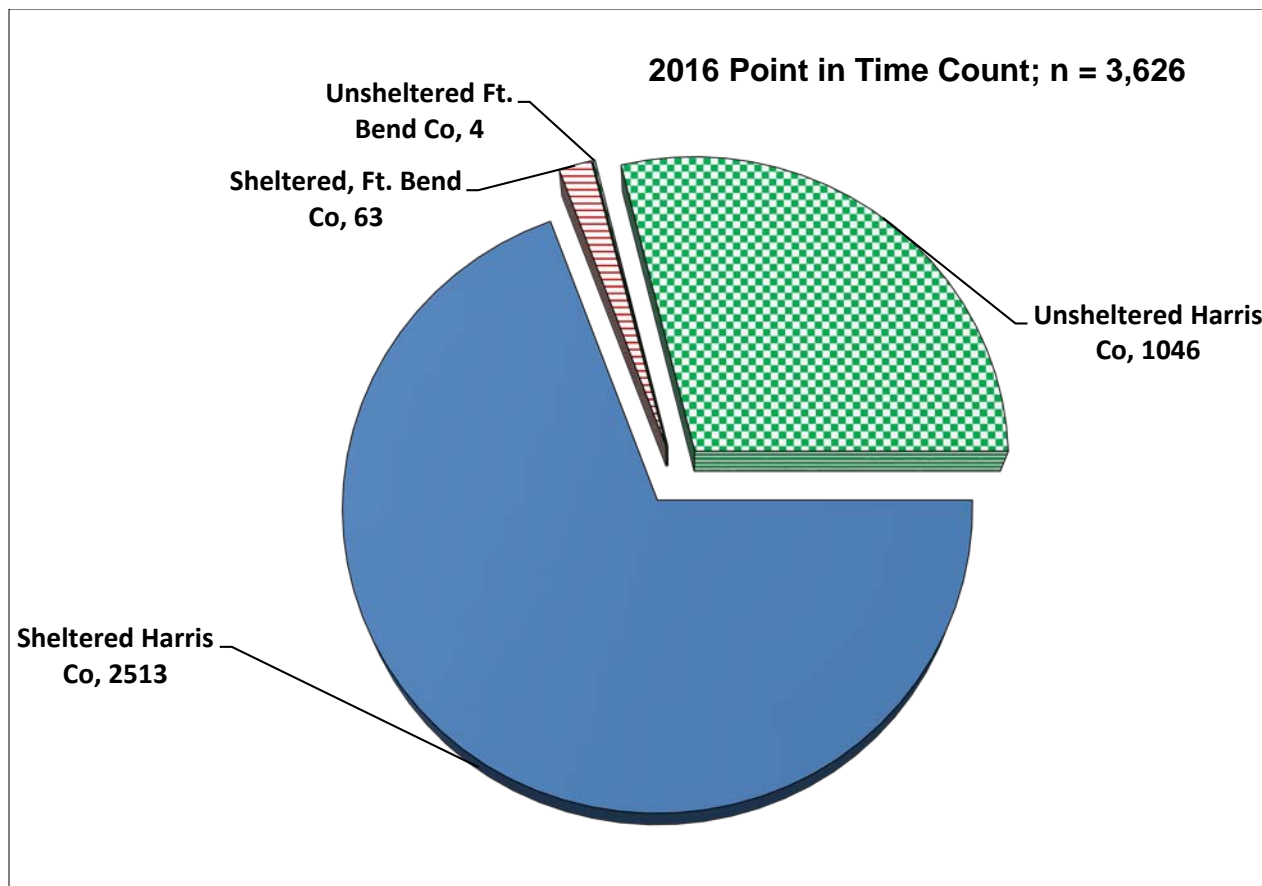
The 2016 PIT Count included a modified effort, based on the 2013 YouthCounts! Initiative, to enumerate emancipated youth and young adults ages 24 and younger who have not been optimally counted in previous years. Specialized Youth Outreach teams were also deployed during the count. Many of the youth were not considered homeless by HUD guidelines and so not included in the official PIT Count, but information collected will be useful in designing programs for this age group.

### **2016 PIT Count Key Findings**

Data collected show a total of 3,626 sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals (per HUD's definition) in the Houston/Pasadena/Harris County/Fort Bend County region during the PIT Count (Figure 1). Breaking down where those experiencing homelessness were found, 67 (1.9%) were counted in Ft. Bend county, a decrease over last year's finding of 5.5%. The combined population of Harris and Ft. Bend counties, according to population estimates on 1 July 2015, was 5,254,115<sup>2</sup>. This puts the percent of homeless individuals within these two counties at 0.069% or 1 out of every 1,450 residents in 2016 compared to 1 out of every 450 residents in 2011 and 1 out of every 1,130 in 2015, a significant decrease.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/> accessed 16 May 2016



**Figure 1**

**Comparison between 2016 and 2011-2015 PIT Counts**

Findings from the last five years are shown in Figure 2. While the PIT Counts during years 2011-2015 used a standardized methodology and so valid comparisons can be made between the 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 may likely miss some people and therefore undercount. However, it is also possible that despite our best efforts, there is no way to verify that those observed during the count are actually homeless per the HUD definition or that they were not counted before, two limitations that might lead to an overcount. Our method of attempting to directly engage and interview all persons presumed

to be experiencing homeless 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 also collected information on whether or not they qualified as homeless per the HUD definition.

The 2016 PIT Count of 3,626 persons experiencing homelessness shows a decrease of 4,912 persons from 2011. This corresponds to a 58% decrease compared to the 2011 PIT Count and a 21% decrease in homeless individuals counted compared to the 2015 PIT Count of sheltered and unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness. The decrease seen is encouraging and while the precise magnitude cannot be determined, the level and trend of the decrease does provide solid evidence that there are fewer persons experiencing homelessness in the Houston/Pasadena/Harris County/Fort Bend County area over the past five years.

In 2016, 1,050 of those experiencing homelessness (29% of the total) were found on the streets or in places not meant for habitation compared to 1,950 (42%) in 2015, 2,291 (43%) in 2014, 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 coupled with the implementation of Coordinated Access to create a standardized entry process into permanent housing.

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

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 2016 PIT Count (Figure 3), the total number of homeless individuals in the region is 5,737 with the largest percentage sheltered (46%).

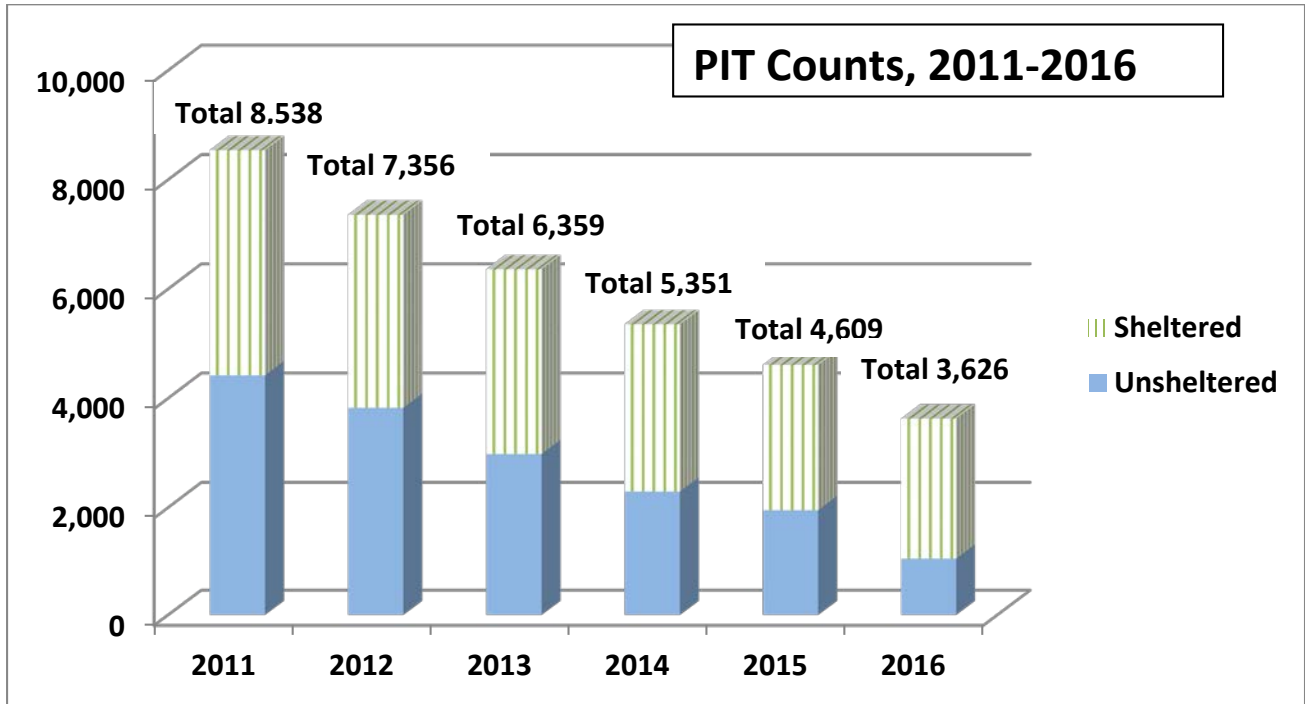
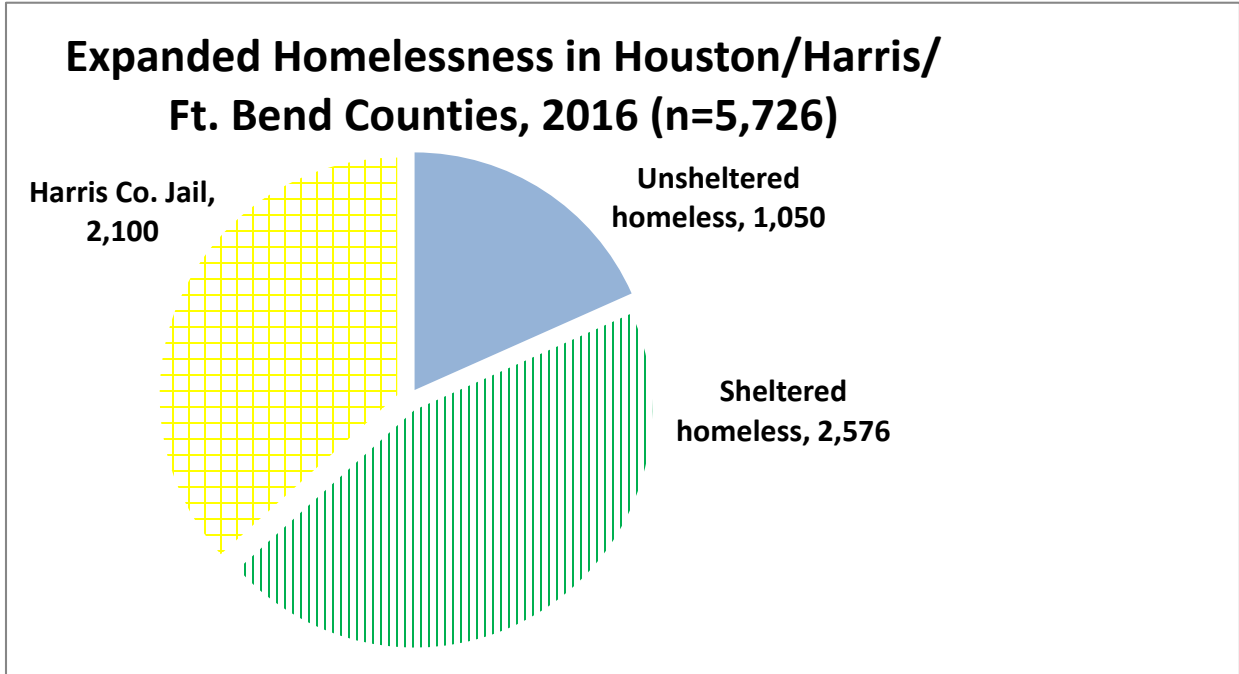


Figure 2



**Figure 3**

A comparison of data from 2011 and 2016 using this expanded definition of homelessness is shown in Figure 4. In 2011, 11,152 individuals were deemed to be experiencing homelessness using the expanded definition. The 2016 finding of 5,726 represents a 58% decrease or 6,426 fewer people in the total number of those counted experiencing homelessness since 2011, a decrease similar to that found when assessing using only the HUD definition of homelessness. The decrease seen is encouraging, particularly given the estimated increase of over 469,000 in the population of Harris and Ft. Bend Counties over the last five years.

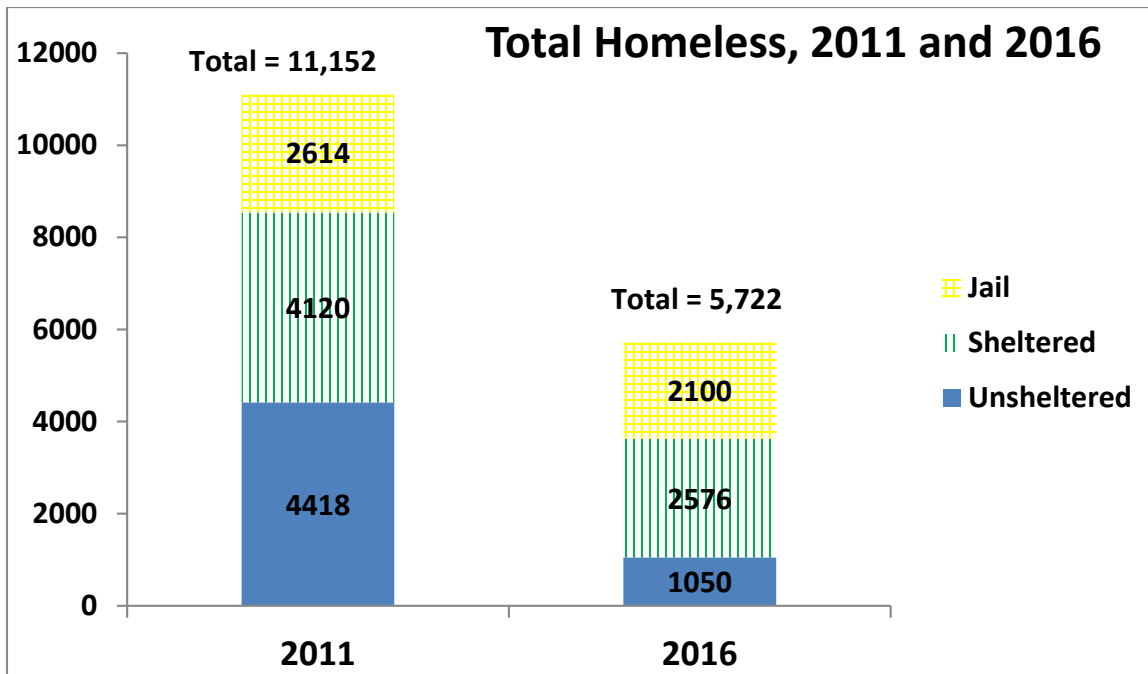
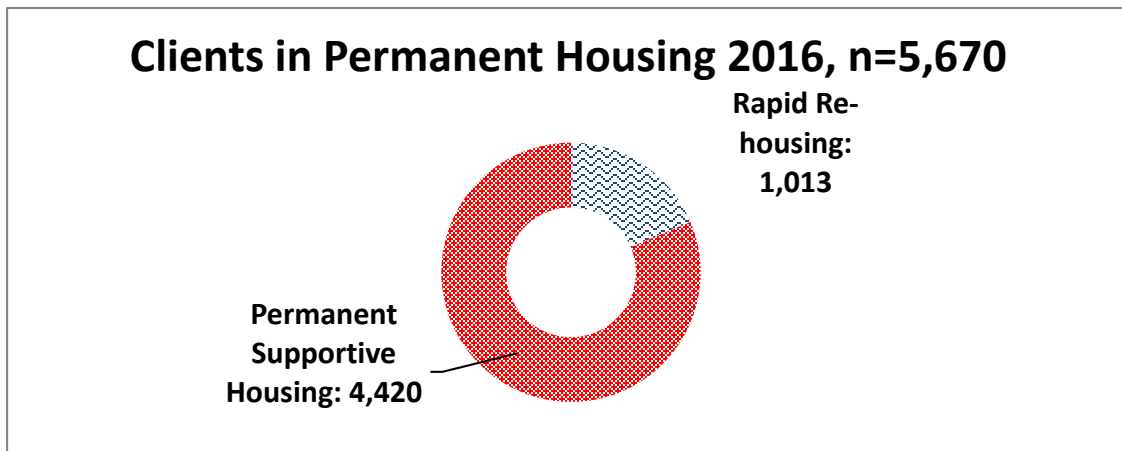


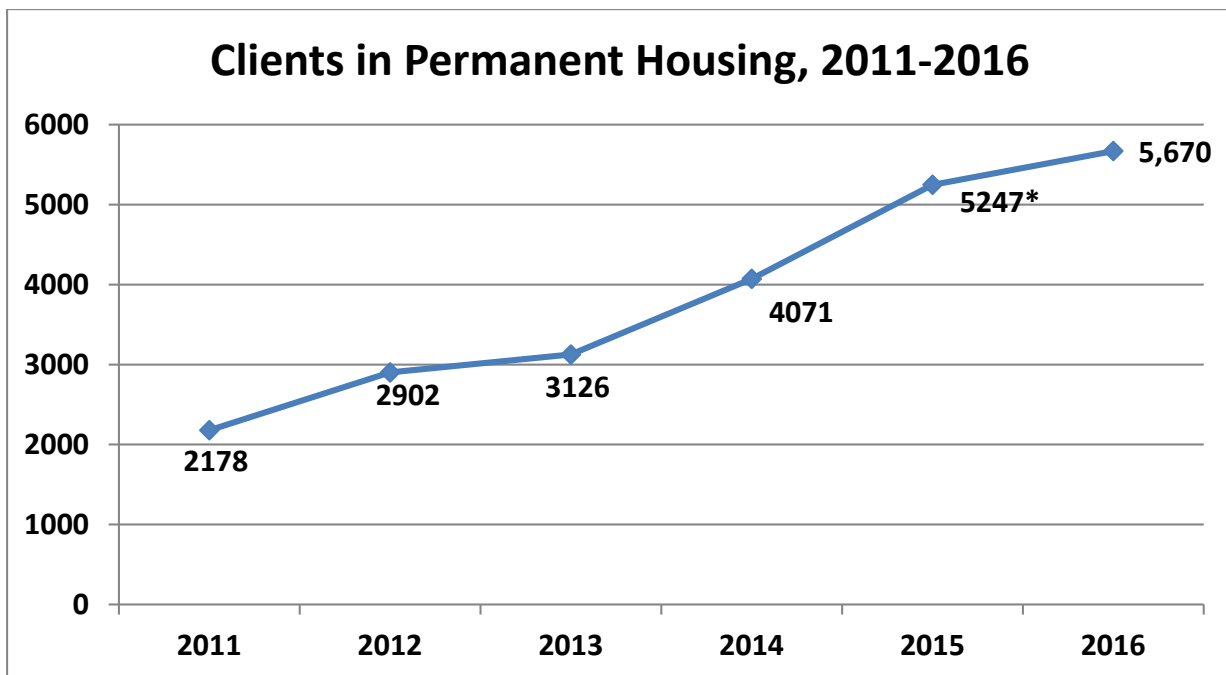
Figure 4

### Permanent Housing

Coinciding with the observed decrease in the number of persons counted who were experiencing homelessness is an increase in the number of persons placed in permanent housing. Permanent housing consists of Rapid Re-housing (RRH) and Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH). On the night of the 2016 PIT Count, there were 5,670 persons in permanent housing. The majority of clients (78%) were in PSH (Figure 5). Figure 6 shows a comparison of the number of clients in permanent housing from 2011 – 2016. This represents an 8% increase of permanent housing utilization from 2015, and a 160% increase since 2011. Furthermore, from January 2012 through April 2016, 4,611 Veterans and 3,120 chronically homeless persons were placed in PSH, and 1,013 persons were placed in RRH through Coordinated Access from January 2015 through April 2016.



**Figure 5**



**Figure 6**

\* includes both permanent housing and reassigned beds to Rapid Re-housing

The increase in permanent housing utilization at any given time in the Houston/Pasadena/Harris County/Fort Bend County CoC, as well as the cumulative number of Veterans, chronically homeless individuals, and families housed in RRH support the decrease in homelessness seen in the PIT Counts of the past five years.

## **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<sup>3</sup>, victims of Domestic Violence, persons with HIV/AIDS, and those who are severely mentally ill or experience chronic substance use disorder. This information can be captured by 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's more difficult to get this information on the unsheltered population as these characteristics can't be determined by observation. In previous years during the observational counts, we administered paper surveys to those interviewed by outreach specialist teams on 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 Count, due to the use of electronic surveys, we were able to capture information on all of those interviewed. Unfortunately, however, only approximately half of the unsheltered homeless were interviewed due to lack of tablets to enter information, refusal by individuals to participate in the survey, or inability to access the person. The results from those interviewed were extrapolated to the total community of those experiencing homelessness. One caveat is

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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 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.

that information was based on self-reporting and so may over or underrepresent the true percentage in the population.

The age of individuals surveyed was recorded for the unsheltered and the age range documented for the sheltered individuals and total population. Of the unsheltered homeless population, only one individual was under the age of 18 years while the vast majority (94%) were over the age of 24 years. The sheltered homeless population looked very different. Of the 2576 persons in emergency shelter or transitional housing, one of five (22%) was below the age of 18 years and one out of 16 (6.8%), ages 18-24 years. Forty-two percent of those under age 18 were in transitional housing. Only 19 of the 202 young adults ages 18-24 in the shelter the night of the Count were not part of a household.

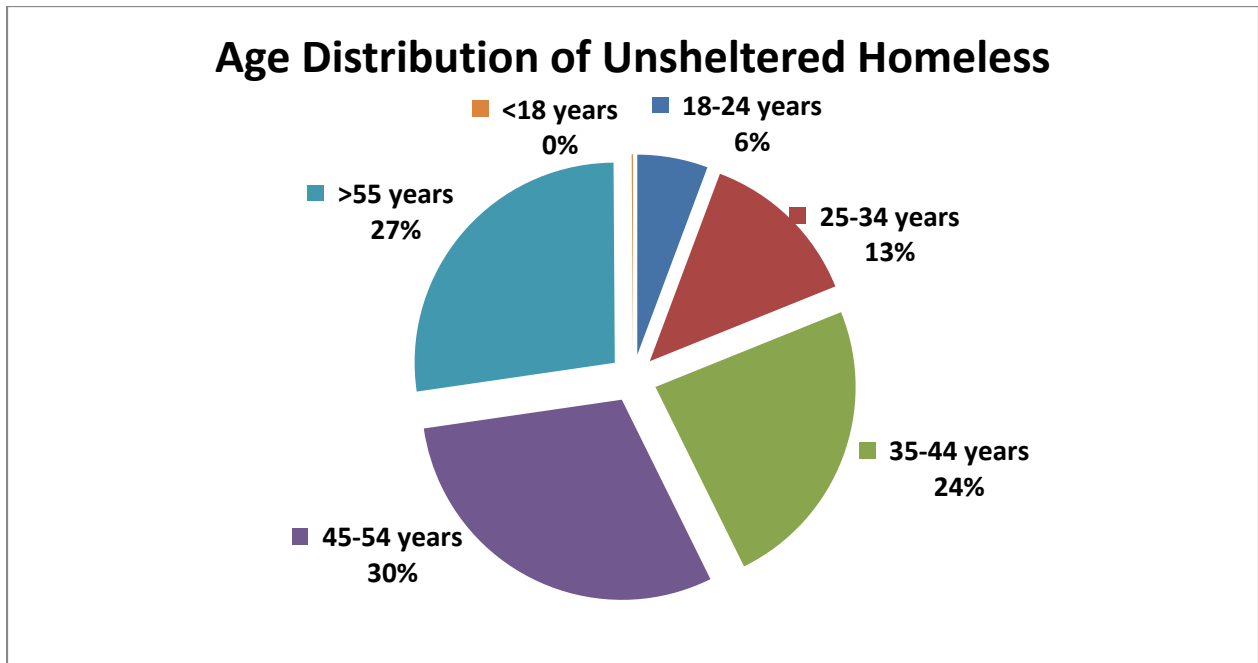


Figure 7a

### Age Distribution of Sheltered Homeless

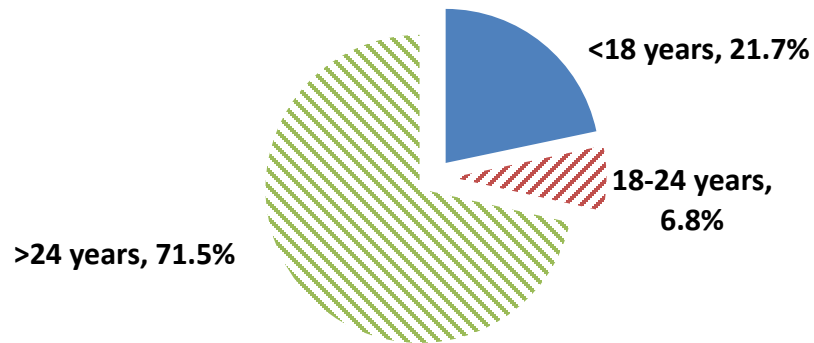


Figure 7b

### Age Distribution, Total Homeless Population

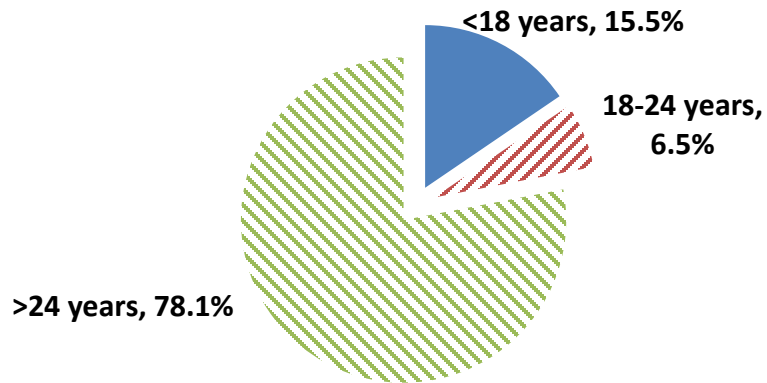
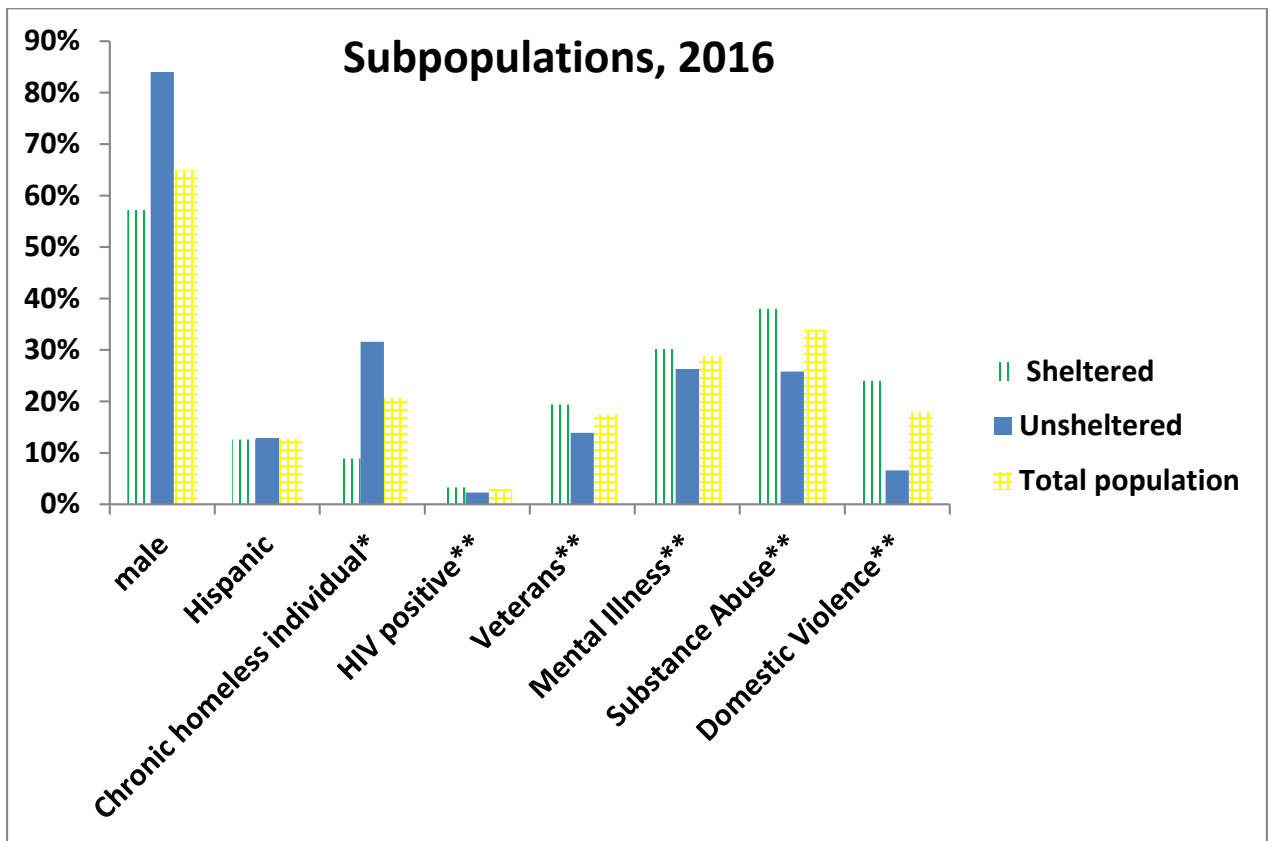


Figure 7c

Figures 8 and 9 show results for the total homeless population surveyed as well as a breakdown by sheltered and unsheltered status. Most (85%) of the unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness were male although there were more females in the shelters than on the streets (43% vs. 15%). Overall, two of three persons experiencing homeless were male. Only four transgender persons were identified in the total population.

The number of Veterans (those who served in the military or activated into the National Guard) experiencing homelessness decreased 5% from 2015 (563) to 2016 (537). Gap analysis and take down targeting has 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. Nearly three out of four of the 537 homeless Veterans identified this year were in emergency shelters or transitional housing, a dramatic decrease in those on the streets compared to last year.



**Figure 8**

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

\*\*among adults only

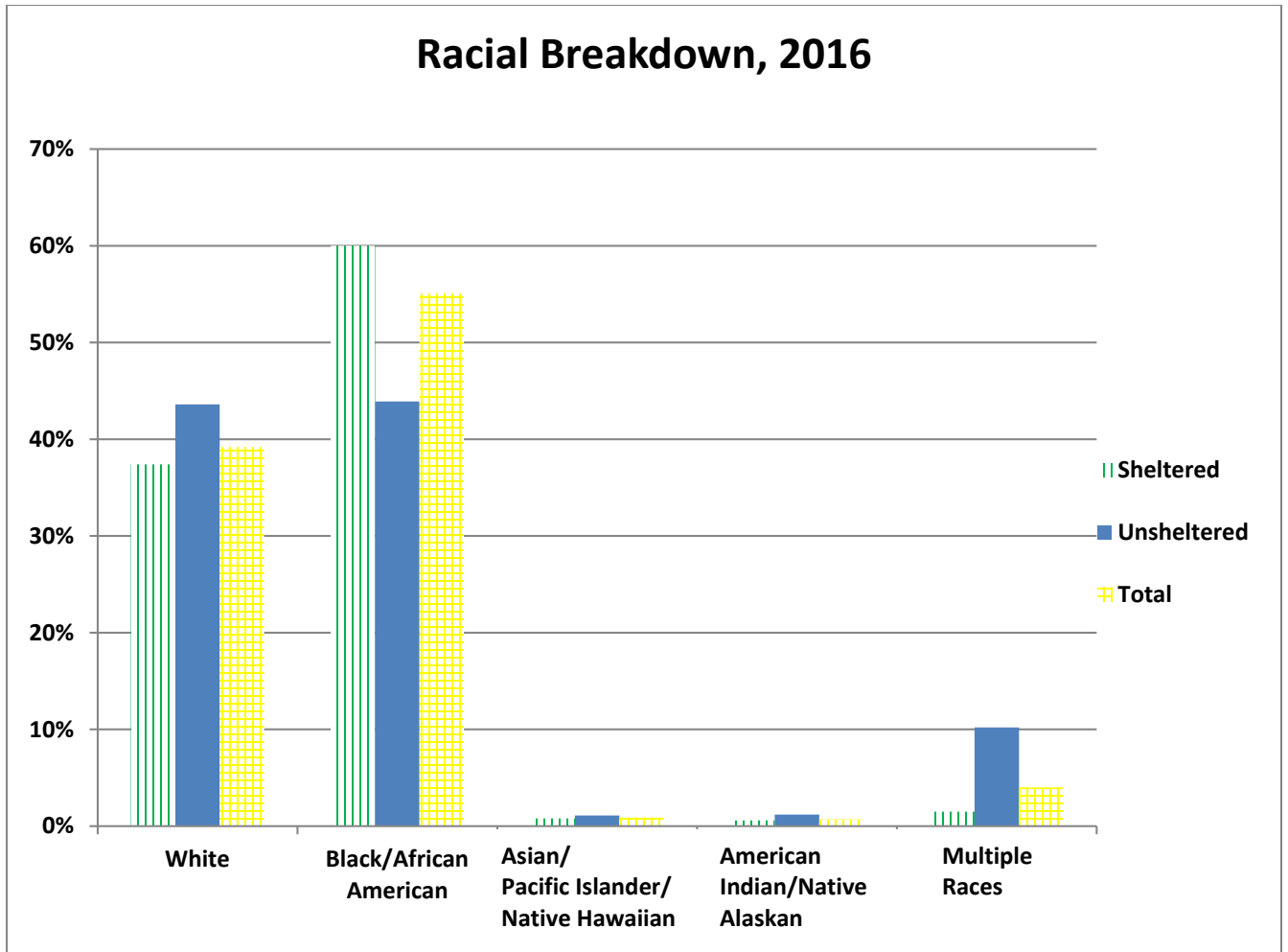


Among the total adult homeless population counted, approximately one in five (20.7%) met the HUD definition of a chronically homeless individual with only two chronically homeless families (both sheltered) identified. The lower rate of chronicity among those in shelters (8.9%) points to the success of prioritizing those individuals for placement in permanent housing.

Other subpopulations reported in the total adult population experiencing homelessness include more than one in four (28.9%) with severe mental illness and one in three with substance use disorder (34%). Approximately one in thirty-three (3.0%) reported as HIV positive although the true percentage may be higher since many may not have been tested and therefore don't know that they are positive. One in four of those in shelters had experienced Domestic Violence, not surprising since there are shelter beds specifically dedicated to those in that situation.

Among those in emergency shelters on the night of the PIT Count, approximately one out of every eleven adults (8.9%) was classified as a chronically homeless individual. Only two chronically homeless families consisting of five family members (total) were identified. Among the unsheltered population, one-third (32%) of adults were chronically homeless (no unsheltered families with minor children were identified). In past years, both the percent with mental illness and those with chronic substance abuse disorder were higher among unsheltered individuals than sheltered individuals; however, we did not find this this year (26% vs. 30% and 26% vs. 38%, respectively). However, these data are self-reported and so are subject to recognition and reporting of these issues by the respondent.

The racial self-classification of those experiencing homelessness is shown in Figure 9. The vast majority of those experiencing homelessness were White or Black/African-American. Among the unsheltered were approximately equal numbers of Whites and Black/African-American but fewer Whites were found in shelters.



**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/Pasadena/Harris County/Fort Bend County region was used until 2015. This 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 every person identified who was experiencing homelessness was attempted to be interviewed. If that was not possible, observational data was recorded. A total of 3,626 persons experiencing

homelessness were counted with 1,050 (29%) unsheltered homeless individuals (staying in a place not meant for human habitation) and 2,576 (71%) staying in emergency shelters or transitional housing that evening. No persons were staying in safe havens. Most of these individuals were found in Harris County (98.2%). An expanded definition of homelessness which includes those in jail on the night of the count who indicated that they were homeless before arrest led to a total count of 5,726 individuals.

The 2016 PIT Count represents a 58% decrease in the number of homeless individuals counted compared to the number counted in January 2011 and a 21% decrease compared to the number counted in January 2015. Concomitant with this has been an increase in those placed in permanent housing (Figure 10). Similar PIT Count methodologies were used from 2011-2015, allowing for direct comparisons; however the unsheltered count methodology was modified this year. While this makes comparisons 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/Pasadena/Harris County/Fort Bend County.

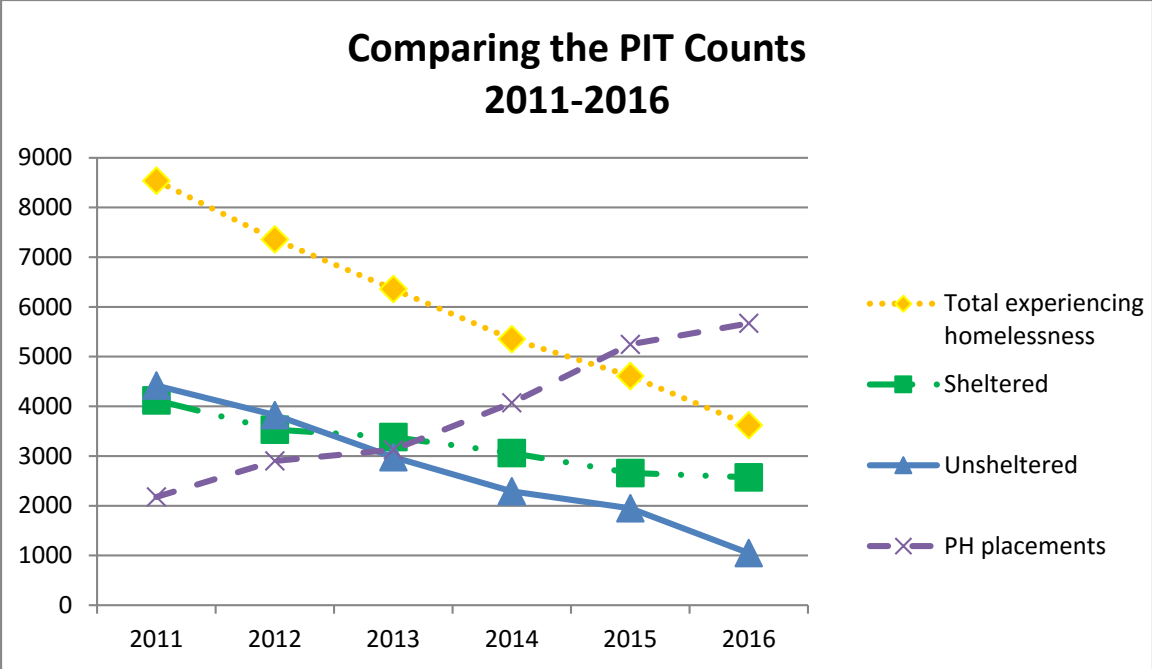


Figure 10