Every year, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requests an unduplicated count of the homeless population in order to assess their housing and service needs, usually called the Point-in-Time count. This count is performed by organizations that receive homeless assistance funding from HUD, under the direction of the local Continua of Care (CoC). CoCs, representing the local network of homeless assistance and prevention service providers, coordinate the process and provide the resulting information to HUD. Information derived from the Point-in-Time count is vital, as it provides necessary feedback as to the success of the Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness\(^1\) effort – goals set forth by the White House and appropriate federal agencies to address homelessness in America.

The Point-in-Time documents the number of homeless persons residing in emergency shelters, transitional housing projects or safe haven projects (“Sheltered”) annually, while counts of homeless persons residing in places not meant for human habitation (“Unsheltered”) must be conducted no less than every other year, but may be included in the annual count. The PIT is held on one chosen day within a ten-day period each year, usually during the last week in January. Such a project involves many tasks and responsibilities. The Louisiana Services Network Data Consortium (LSNDC), the statewide Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) database management organization, is responsible for coordinating both paper and electronic data collection tools, data entry into the HMIS database, and reporting for the entire state. Each individual CoC in Louisiana administers, staffs, and performs the regional counts to ensure that the experience and expertise of the local service organizations can be applied to create the most accurate count possible.

For the 2014 count, the chosen date of January 28\(^{th}\) heralded a period of ice storms and freezing temperatures that changed the dynamics of the count process greatly. Many unsheltered homeless persons sought protection from the cold with service providers who used additional cots and mats to provide a sleeping surface for every possible person. Outside of these service providers, it was difficult for surveyors to visit more remote locations and count those who had other means of shelter from the cold. This weather disruption caused Regions I and X, Orleans and Jefferson Parishes, to perform their official count on March 31\(^{st}\), two months later.\(^2\)

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Over the past four years, the Point-in-Time counts have shown significant changes in the numbers and types of homeless persons surveyed. In 2011, the Point-in-Time count identified a total of 9,291 sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons, and the 2014 count identified a total of 4,606, demonstrating a decrease of 50%. This reflects the efforts of the various service providers with encouragement from the White House, federal agencies, and organizations such as Orgcode and the 100,000 Homes campaign.

The number of unsheltered homeless persons, in particular, plummeted from 5,886 to 1,103 during that four year time frame, an 80% decrease (Figure 1).

The Point-in-Time count also records household information about survey participants. During the past four years, Louisiana’s service providers have successfully reduced the number of homeless households without children by 58% (Figure 2). For these households, approximately 34% spent the night of the count in transitional housing projects, 34% were in emergency shelters, and 32% were unsheltered (Figure 3). It is important to note that even with the drastic reduction in numbers, persons in households without children comprised the majority of those identified as experiencing homelessness in Louisiana during the count.

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Another household type recorded in the count consists of those with at least one adult and one child. In 2014, there were 14% fewer of these households than in 2011 (Figure 2), of which 71% were sheltered in a transitional housing project, 27% in an emergency shelter, and only 2% were on the street or in places not meant for human habitation (Figure 3).

The remaining household type is child-only households, for those households where all members are under 18 or is an individual youth not accompanied by an adult. The recording of child-only households began in 2012, and the number of such households has increased by 6% over the past three years (Figure 2). On the night of the count, 75% of child-only households were staying in a transitional housing project, 19% were in an emergency shelter, and 6% were on the street or in a place not meant for human habitation (Figure 3).

Two particular subpopulations of homeless persons that are highlighted in the federal plan are veterans and persons experiencing chronic homelessness. Special initiatives to address these groups have been implemented over the past few years by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the White House. Veterans are defined as those who have served on active duty in the Armed Forces of the United States, not including inactive military reserves or the National Guard, unless called to active duty. Since 2011, Louisiana has seen a 79% decrease in unsheltered and a 25% decrease in sheltered veterans, for a 54% decrease overall (Figure 4). Chronic homelessness is defined as having a disabling condition of long duration and having been homeless for either a full year or longer, or having had four periods of homelessness in the past three years. Since 2011, Louisiana’s service providers have reduced the number of those experiencing chronic homelessness from 4,352 to 773 – an over 82% decrease (Figure 5).

Another significant subpopulation of homeless persons is survivors of domestic violence, as this situation is an appreciable contributor to homelessness for many women. For the 2014 Point-in-Time count, 632 persons reported that they were survivors of domestic violence, which equates to 14% of the total number of people surveyed. Of that subpopulation, 497 or 79% were in emergency shelters or transitional housing at the time of the count.
Demographic information is collected on all respondents as part of the count (Figure 6). Of those surveyed, slightly fewer than 62% identified as male and almost 38% identified as female, while a very small minority, 0.3%, identified as transgender. The racial demographic data showed that 62% of respondents identified as Black or African American, 33% as White and a little over 1% as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Fewer than 1% of respondents identified as Asian or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and almost 3% reported multiple races. In addition, 3% of the same respondents identified their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino.

The health status of Point-in-Time participants is also recorded as part of the process. Three particular disabling or chronic health conditions were found in a significant number of adults: serious mental illness, substance abuse disorders, and HIV/AIDS. Out of a total population of 4,606, 1,232 adults, or nearly one-third, self-reported mental illness; 1,623 adults, or over 43%, self-reported substance abuse; and 123 adults, or a little over 3%, reported HIV/AIDS infection (Figure 7).

Louisiana’s human services providers have embraced the call to serve our homeless neighbors, and the results of their sustained dedication and caring are visible in the statistics previously presented. Their hard work has managed to reduce the number of individuals and families experiencing homelessness throughout the state by over half in the past four years. In particular, efforts to aid those who are sleeping on the streets or in cars, abandoned buildings and other places not intended to serve as housing has yielded an 80% reduction in unsheltered persons since 2011. There are still men, women and children suffering from the effects of homelessness, and the work necessary to prevent and end homelessness is not finished. With continued diligence and cross-partnerships of public and private organizations that are focused upon making safe, affordable housing accessible to all, it is possible that within a very short time - years rather than decades - all residents of Louisiana will have a place to call home.