



## **2013 Kern County Point-In-Time Homeless Count Report**

### **Introduction**

Since 2007, when the **Kern County Homeless Collaborative** began conducting full countywide counts of sheltered and unsheltered homeless every two years, the number of homeless persons found throughout Kern County on any given night had remained steady: between around 1,440 and 1,540 including single adults, families with children, and, on rare occasions, unaccompanied homeless minors.

That changed dramatically this year, when the **2013 Point-in-Time Count of the Homeless** conducted over a 24-hour period from 4 p.m. Wednesday, January 23, through 4 p.m. Thursday, January 24, **yielded a count of 20% fewer homeless overall: down from 1,439 in the 2011 count to 1,158 in this year's count.**

Reduction in overall homelessness is a goal set by the **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)** for communities across the nation that receive funding through the **Continuum of Care Program** to provide housing and services for the homeless. In recent years, our community, known to HUD as the **Bakersfield/Kern Continuum of Care**, has received between **\$3 Million** and **\$5 Million** annually to help fight homelessness. The Point-in-Time Homeless Count (also referred to as the **"Homeless Census"**) is a HUD-mandated activity that provides a snapshot of the local state of homelessness in Bakersfield, Delano and all of Kern County and ensures the continued flow of federal dollars into our community to provide for housing and other needs.

Reduction in overall homelessness is also a goal the Homeless Collaborative has set for itself through **"Home First! Kern County's 10-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness,"** and in its mission: **To put an end to homelessness in Kern County through collaborative planning and action.**

The large drop in the overall number of homeless persons counted between 2011 and 2013 can be attributed in great part to additional resources available to the Homeless Collaborative during the last two years to house the homeless. These include millions of federal dollars in **American Recovery and Reinvestment Act-funded Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing (HPRP)** assistance for the homeless and at risk, and **Housing Voucher Programs from the Housing Authority of the County of Kern and the Veterans Administration** that made permanent housing affordable to many homeless individuals and families, especially those unable to work because of a physical or mental disability.

Some of these resources, like HPRP, which was a time-limited stimulus program, have dried up--but not without first having helped achieve noticeable results in homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing that have encouraged HUD to reintroduce a longer-term version of the program.

But we must not discount the influence of rainy weather from the night of January 23<sup>rd</sup> through the morning of January 24<sup>th</sup>, which may have kept some homeless persons off the street where they could otherwise have been counted more easily. We will have to wait until the January 2104 count to find out how great an influence the weather played this year.

There are a number of accomplishments and challenges or troubling trends revealed by the numbers of this year's Homeless Census. We will now highlight some of the most prominent ones in a reader-friendly format.

## ***Accomplishments***

### **1) 20% Fewer Homeless Counted:** 1,439 in 2011; 1,158 in 2013.

- **The Positive:** Any count that represents a decrease in overall homelessness is good, but a **solid double-digit percentage decrease** is doubly good.
- **The Negative:** a) On any given night in Kern County, there are still between 1,100 and 1,200 people who are homeless. As has been the constant in other years, 75% of homeless persons in Kern are male, and 25% are female. "Zero homelessness" must still be the goal toward which we strive. b) As pointed out above, some sources of funding for homeless housing and services, like ARRA-HPRP, have dried up. c) Rainy weather during the 2013 Homeless Count may have kept some unsheltered homeless off the streets where they could be counted.

- **Analysis:** Since 2011, the Kern County Homeless Collaborative has added plenty of proven resources in the local fight against homelessness, including: a) **The hiring of a full-time English-Spanish bilingual Homelessness Project Manager** to help drive the work of the Collaborative; b) **A new website, [kernhomeless.org](http://kernhomeless.org), with dedicated list serve**, that helps with the making of client referrals to partnering agencies and the sharing of valuable information with homeless persons and service providers; c) **Additional outreach efforts** that include **Weekly Roving Street Outreaches; Site-Based Direct Service Outreach Days in rural communities; Project Homeless Connect One-Day Resource Fair for the Homeless; SSI/SSDI Outreach Access and Recovery**, which links eligible homeless to Social Security benefits quickly and efficiently; the **Home First/100,000 Homes Campaign Project** to get the most medically vulnerable homeless off the streets and into housing; and d) **Special VA/HUD-funded programs** to house homeless veterans and train them for jobs.

## 2) **22% Fewer Homeless Veterans Counted:** 173 in 2011; 135 in 2013

- **The Positive:** The great reduction in the Homeless Veteran subpopulation suggested by this year's count is good because homeless veterans often suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other combat-related injuries that make them particularly vulnerable. Also, a reduction in Veterans Homelessness is a goal of both HUD and the VA.
- **The Negative:** Close to half of Kern County homeless vets (65 altogether, or 48%) are unsheltered. **(However, this still represents close to one-third fewer unsheltered homeless veterans than the 94 counted in 2011.)**
- **Analysis:** Many new programs that prioritize housing and work reintegration for homeless veterans have been implemented over the last year by **KCHC member California Veterans Assistance Foundation**, which organizes the **Kern County Veterans Stand Down** and has successfully procured some **\$800,000 in HUD, VA and other grants to assist homeless vets.**

## 3) **32% Fewer Unsheltered Homeless in Metro Bakersfield**

In 2011, 718 unsheltered homeless were counted in Metro Bakersfield, which has the largest concentration of homeless (sheltered or unsheltered) in all of Kern County. **In 2013, 486 (32% fewer) unsheltered homeless were counted.**

- **The Positive:** This reduction in the number of unsheltered homeless may be due in great part to the **KCHC's successful implementation of best-practice models** such as **Housing First, HPRP**, and the **100,000 Homes Campaign**, which are helping to put a dent in unsheltered homelessness.
- **The Negative:** a) 486 unsheltered homeless persons living in Bakersfield is still 486 too many. More work needs to be done to ensure they are sheltered and housed. b) Rainy weather during the 2013 Homeless Count may have kept some unsheltered homeless off the streets where they could be counted.
- **Analysis:** The KCHC's ongoing **Roving Street Outreaches, Site-Based Outreaches** and **Home First/100,000 Homes Campaign** efforts take place in Metro Bakersfield, and should continue to ensure contact with unsheltered homeless who can be linked to permanent housing and other life-changing services. Furthermore, **the 100,000 Homes Campaign effort yielded a by-name registry of Bakersfield's street homeless, including the location where they were found.** This is an effective strategy to connect with street homeless, with the aim of linking them to services.

#### **4) Length of Time Homeless Down by 1 Year from 39 to 27 months**

- **The Positive:** To reduce by a whole 12 months the average time that a local person is homeless is quite an accomplishment.
- **The Negative:** This is still significantly higher than the national average, which is closer to 8 months, according to recent studies.
- **Analysis:** Being homeless, especially being unsheltered, can reduce a person's life expectancy in the same way that cancer can, according to the 100,000 Homes Campaign to house the 100,000 most medically vulnerable street homeless in America by mid-2014. Homelessness involves such health risks as exposure, infection by any number of communicable diseases, victimization/assault, substance abuse, lack of access to adequate healthcare, lack of hygiene, malnourishment, sleep deprivation, mental illness, and stress caused by anything from stigma to hunger to constantly having to live in survival mode. Therefore, reducing the average time that local homeless persons remain in homelessness can only help to improve their quality of life and health.

## 5) 39% Fewer Persons Reported Release from Jail/Prison as the Cause of Their Homelessness

- **The Positive:** In 2011, 217 adults surveyed reported being homeless as a result of having been released from a correctional institution. In 2013, just 132 (39% fewer) reported jail/prison discharge as the reason for their homelessness.
- **The Negative:** This still means that 11% of homeless persons counted (132 out of 1,158 total) are jail/prison releases—although it is still an improvement over 2011’s reported 15% (217 out of a total 1,439).
- **Analysis:** The advocacy work of the Homeless Collaborative’s **Discharge Planning Committee** with local law enforcement, including **Bakersfield Police, the Kern County Sheriff’s Office, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, and the Community Corrections Partnership Committee (CCP)** formed as a result of the passage of **Assembly Bill 109 (the California Safety Realignment Act)**, may have helped in a great way toward this dramatic decrease in the number of offenders discharged into homelessness. This advocacy work also resulted in significant CCP funding to community-based organizations (or CBO’s) to prevent recidivism among non-violent, non-serious, non-sex offenders released back to the community under county supervision. Two KCHC members, **Hearthstone Community Services** and **New Life Recovery and Training Center** were awarded one-half of the nearly \$1 Million funding provided by the CCP in 2013 grants.

## *Challenges or Troubling Trends*

## 6) High Rates of Chronic Substance Abuse—including Meth

- **The Positive:** *The 2013 Homeless Census marked the first time the Homeless Collaborative included a “drug of choice” question in the Point-in-Time survey.* The choices given on the survey were **alcohol, marijuana, cocaine/crack, meth, heroin, prescription drugs and other.** We have been able to name the substance abuse “demons” that are wreaking havoc on the local homeless population: **alcohol and methamphetamine.** And we learned that we need to beef up our efforts to help the homeless dealing with any type of substance abuse.
- **The Negative:** In 2011, 639 surveyed adults reported having chronic substance abuse issues. That number represents 44% of the total homeless population and 49%

of the adult homeless population for that year. In 2013, 568 adults said they abuse alcohol, illegal drugs or prescription medications. The 2013 figure represents almost one-half (49%) of all homeless persons counted and 57% of all adults counted. Three hundred and one (30% of all homeless adults counted; 53% of homeless adults reporting substance abuse) use alcohol. One hundred and ninety-five (close to 20% of all homeless adults counted; 34% of homeless adults reporting substance abuse) use the very dangerous and addictive crystal meth. Particularly alarming is the fact that not having shelter puts a homeless person at higher risk for abusing substances, as the 2013 Point-in-Time survey found that close to two-thirds of alcohol, meth and crack/cocaine users, and almost three out of four heroin users, were living unsheltered.

- **Analysis:** The data collected, especially on **methamphetamine** use, will be shared with the **Kern County Methamphetamine Reduction Task Force**, with which the Homeless Collaborative began a productive collaboration in late 2012. Hopefully this data will motivate stakeholders to procure additional much-needed funding for drug rehabilitation programs for the homeless.

## **7) 12% Hepatitis C Infection Rate Found Among Surveyed Adults**

- **The Positive:** In a sheltered homeless only survey that was conducted in January 2012, a new multiple choice question regarding the chronic illnesses that affect many homeless revealed that Hepatitis C, a debilitating disease spread by blood-to-blood contact, often as a result of needle sharing, was an even more prevalent condition for local homeless adults than Valley Fever, Tuberculosis or HIV/AIDS. The Homeless Collaborative began to keep an eye on this trend.
- **The Negative:** In 2013, 111 surveyed homeless adults said they were infected with Hepatitis C. When comparing that number with 38 Valley Fever infections, 19 Tuberculosis cases and 10 HIV/AIDS sufferers, it is easy to see just how much higher the rate of Hepatitis C infection is among the homeless. More alarming still is the fact that out of the 111, 80 are living unsheltered. As is the case with substance abuse, lack of shelter puts a homeless person at higher risk for contracting an air- or blood-borne communicable disease—the great majority of TB, HIV/AIDS and Valley Fever sufferers surveyed were also unsheltered. And, as is the case with many surveys, the numbers for Hepatitis C and other chronic infections may be significantly underreported due to shame or stigma.
- **Analysis: The Homeless Collaborative is committed to continuing this type of dedicated data tracking** to better understand the needs and challenges of the

homeless population we serve. In fact, **by a unanimous vote of the KCHC's Steering Committee, the Homeless Count has, as of this year's count, become a yearly (rather than an every-other-year) activity.** Planning for the 2014 Homeless Count will begin in June 2013.

## 8) 100% More Homeless Counted in East Kern Communities

- **The Positive:** Due to the great efforts of more than 140 volunteers from KCHC member agencies and the community who signed up to help count the homeless throughout Kern, we achieved what we believe to be an accurate snapshot of homelessness in East Kern.
- **The Negative:** This snapshot revealed a **100% increase in homelessness in the East Kern communities of Mojave and Ridgecrest from 31 in 2011 to 62 in 2013—including 7 homeless families with children.** The limited financial resources these communities receive to fight rural homelessness—including federal funding through the **FEMA Emergency Food & Shelter Program** in the way of rent, utilities and food assistance to at-risk families—were greatly delayed in 2012 due to the government's budget crisis. This and the running out of HPRP funds may have translated into an increase in the number of homeless in some East Kern communities.
- **Analysis:** Through **Housing Voucher Programs** provided by the **Housing Authority of the County of Kern**, the Homeless Collaborative and its partners in these outlying areas can try to find housing opportunities for homeless individuals in rural communities. Coordinated countywide outreach is also a goal of **Home First! Kern County's 10-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness.** The Homeless Collaborative began conducting outreaches in some rural communities along the Highway 99 corridor in 2012, and may need to increase outreach efforts in Eastern Kern as well.

## 9) 56% More Homeless Counted in Oildale

- **The Positive:** Due to the great efforts of more than 140 volunteers from KCHC member agencies and the community who signed up to help count the homeless throughout Kern, we achieved what we believe to be an accurate snapshot of homelessness in Oildale.
- **The Negative:** This snapshot revealed a **56% increase (from 59 in 2011, to 92 in 2013)** in the number of homeless persons counted along the Kern River, and at **Church Without Walls on Beardsley Avenue**, in a high-poverty area of Oildale.

- Analysis:** In early 2012, the leadership of the Homeless Collaborative noticed a trend in increased homelessness in Oildale, particularly in areas adjacent to the Kern River. The homeless camps that have cropped up along the banks of the Kern River have also received considerable attention from law enforcement and the media over the last year. The KCHC's response was to begin a **partnership with Riverview Assembly of God Church**, which is located halfway between the Kern River and Beardsley Avenue. **In October 2012, the Homeless Consumers and Service Providers Committee of the KCHC began conducting direct service outreaches every other month at the church.** As homeless and at-risk individuals and families pick up a hot lunch and a bag of groceries from Riverview, they are also able to talk to representatives from KCHC partners that can help with housing, HIV testing, legal assistance, child welfare, employment training, substance abuse services and other needs, right on the spot.

### Conclusion

The reduced homeless numbers revealed through the **2013 Point-in-Time Homeless Count** are encouraging. Great strides are being made in the local fight against homelessness, and now that the full count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons will be a yearly activity of the **Kern County Homeless Collaborative**, our progress toward the goal of ending homelessness will be tracked that much more closely.

The challenges and troubling trends found, however, remind us that there is still much work to do before we can put an end to homelessness in our county.

The Kern County Homeless Collaborative cannot accomplish its work alone. It needs the support of all segments of the community (policymakers, law enforcement officers, medical/mental health care providers, faith-based organizations, funders, educators, media, private citizens, and homeless or formerly homeless individuals) in order to find solutions to the problem of homelessness.

For information on how to get involved with the Homeless Collaborative, please visit **our website**, [www.kernomeless.org](http://www.kernomeless.org). Please also visit our Facebook page, "**Faces of Homelessness**," at <https://www.facebook.com/fohkern>.