



ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNITY NEEDS IN

SOUTHEAST LOUISIANA

Using VIA LINK's  211 CALL DATA

2012 - 2021



THE UNIVERSITY of
NEW ORLEANS

VIALINK
LISTENING • UNDERSTANDING • CONNECTING

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Introduction

[VIA LINK](#) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that serves tens of thousands of people a year by providing crisis support, connecting people to services, and providing vital data about community needs. VIA LINK's crisis contact center is based in New Orleans and manages more than 30 crisis and human service phone, text and chat lines in Louisiana and nationally. VIA LINK is accredited by the [Alliance of Information and Referrals Systems \(AIRS\)](#) to provide information and referral services, and the [American Association of Suicidology](#) to provide crisis support.

Of all the crisis and human services lines that VIA LINK answers, the one with the highest call volume is the 211 information and referral system for Southeast Louisiana. Dialing 211 operates like 911: calls are routed to the local agency that manages the 211 system for that region. Each agency maintains an extensive database of resources available in their area, which staff uses to refer callers to organizations that can address their needs. Trained call specialists are available 24/7 to provide a range of support, including referrals to services for food, shelter, utility assistance, mental and physical health care, work and family support, assistance with disaster response, and more.

VIA LINK plays a large role in the region's disaster response, serving as a primary source of information during hurricanes and public health emergencies like the COVID pandemic. The State of Louisiana contracts with the Louisiana 211 Statewide Network to act as its source of information and assistance during these emergencies. VIA LINK remained operable 24/7 during Hurricane Ida and its aftermath despite utility and telephone interruptions.



About this Report

VIA LINK partnered with researchers from the [University of New Orleans](#) (UNO) [Master of Public Administration](#) (MPA) program to conduct a community needs assessment for southeast Louisiana based on anonymous 211 call data over the past decade. The research team evaluated call data to pinpoint the greatest needs of those seeking VIA LINK's services and how needs changed over time, including significant changes during the COVID pandemic and Hurricane Ida. The goal was to help VIA LINK and its partners better anticipate and respond to community needs and help fill gaps in regional resources.

This report shares findings from the study for public use. It explains the approach and limitations of the research, followed by trends in three areas: who calls 211, what their greatest needs are overall and during disasters, and what resource gaps exist. It concludes with recommendations for VIA LINK as well as its government and nonprofit partners so the data can be turned into action that strengthens our region.



Research Design



In partnership with VIA LINK, the research team from UNO compiled and analyzed anonymous 211 call data from January 2012 to December 2021. This data comes from call reports completed by the call specialists who answered each call. They record the date of the call, the caller's self-reported parish and zip code of residence, demographics (gender, age category, race/ethnicity, and disability status), needs expressed, and referrals made. Needs were categorized according to a [nationally accepted taxonomy system](#).

In addition, the research team reviewed VIA LINK's database of referral resources as of February 2022. The database includes information on each organization that VIA LINK actively refers callers to, including its physical address, and the types of needs it serves following the same taxonomy system. Both call and resource datasets are maintained by VIA LINK specialists and are publicly available in the form of a [searchable resource database](#) and anonymized and aggregated [public dashboards](#) of call data.

Resource locations were mapped through geographic information system (GIS) software and linked to publicly available data for each area, specifically the CDC/ATSDR Social Vulnerability Index ([SVI](#)). The SVI index combines 15 U.S. census variables across each census tract to identify areas most in need of support before, during, and after disasters. These variables are grouped into four themes: socioeconomic status, household composition, race/ethnicity/language, and housing/transportation. Mapping allowed for visual exploration of any gaps in resource accessibility based on geographic proximity to socially vulnerable populations.

Figure 1. The 10 parishes of Southeast Louisiana that were studied

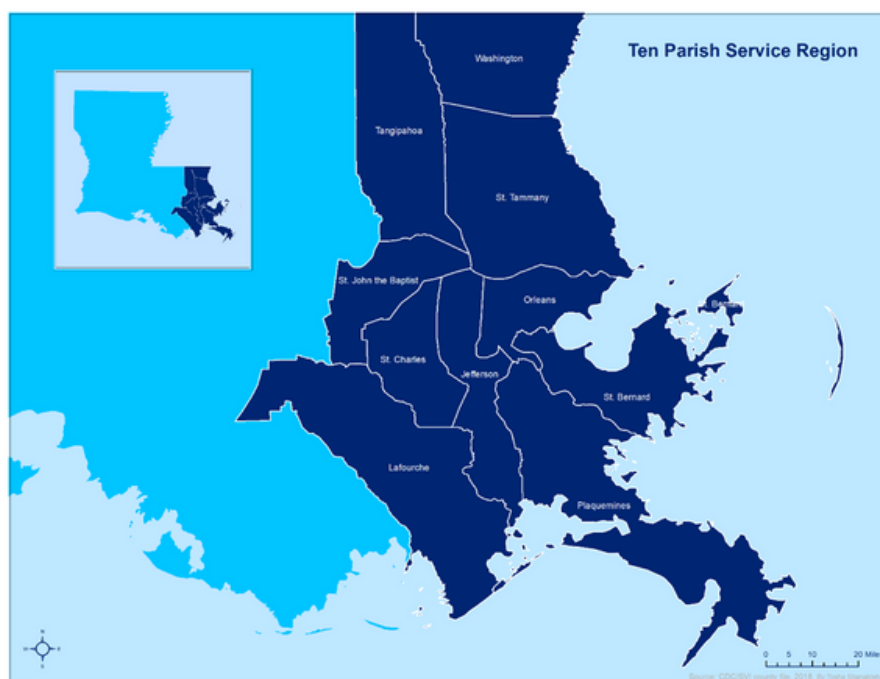


Table 1. Orleans and Jefferson Parishes have high population and poverty rate

Parish	2020 Population	Poverty Rate	Median Income
Jefferson	434,903	16.1%	\$54,825
Lafourche	97,980	14.5%	\$54,530
Orleans	391,249	21.1%	\$43,258
Plaquemines	23,305	16.6%	\$65,234
St. Bernard	46,694	21.3%	\$47,873
St. Charles	52,856	11.3%	\$68,113
St. John the Baptist	43,055	16.9%	\$55,429
St. Tammany	258,447	10%	\$70,730
Tangipahoa	133,753	20.1%	\$48,745
Washington	46,325	19.6%	\$39,185



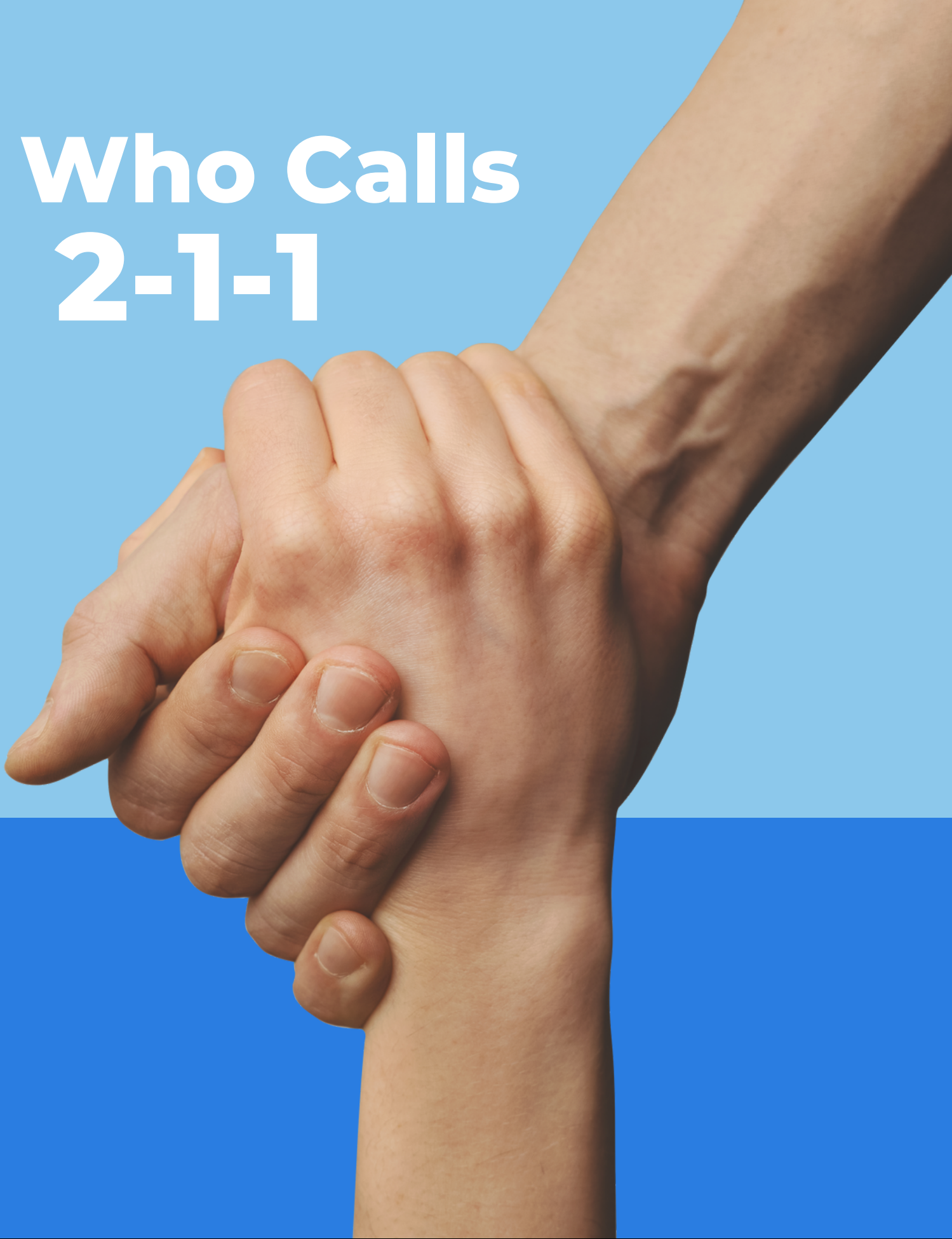
Limitations

Although VIA LINK's contact center answers more than 30 crisis and human services lines, only 211 call data was included in the analysis. VIA LINK's crisis support and suicide prevention hotlines are particularly sensitive by nature, do not always result in identified needs and referrals, and are collected from different geographic jurisdictions than the ten-parish 211 region. In addition, call data does not reflect callers who received referrals through automated messages about rental and utility assistance that people can access by dialing 211, or people who got information from VIA LINK's [online resource directory](#).

Only 211 calls that originated from callers residing within the ten-parish service region for southeast Louisiana were included in analysis. Parishes covered include Jefferson, Orleans, Lafourche, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, and Washington. Likewise only resources physically located within the region were mapped, which excludes remote resources like national hotlines based in other states.

Lastly, call report procedures have changed over time, such as the types of call data that is collected and the consistency and quality of call reports. Therefore, data provide information on general trends over time for comparison, but should not be viewed as exact. That said, VIA LINK has continuously enhanced the quality of its data, providing useful information on community needs and resource availability for the purpose of this study.

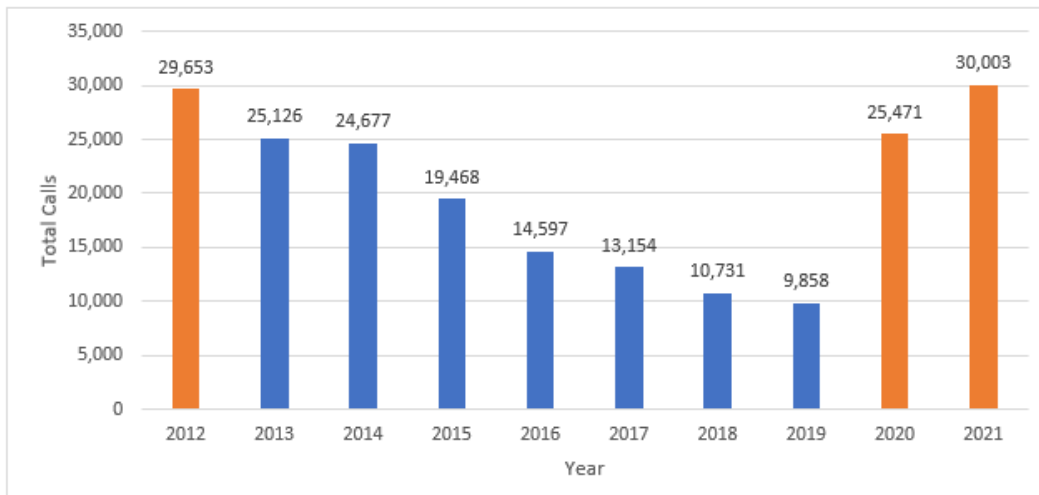
Who Calls 2-1-1



Averages and Increases During Disasters

VIA LINK's 211 service received more than 200,000 calls, texts, or online chat requests through the 211 system (simplified from here on as "calls") that reached call specialists and were entered into call reports from 2012 to the end of 2021. This averages more than 20,000 per year, almost 1,700 per month, and 56 per day. However, the number of calls varies by year, and especially increased during years with large-scale disasters including 2012 (Hurricane Isaac), 2020 (COVID pandemic and multiple hurricanes), and 2021 (COVID variants and Hurricane Ida). Recent disasters since 2020 reversed a trend of consistent decline in the annual number of calls to 211.

Figure 2. 211 calls increased during years with large-scale disasters.



258%

Increase in calls from 2019 to 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic started.

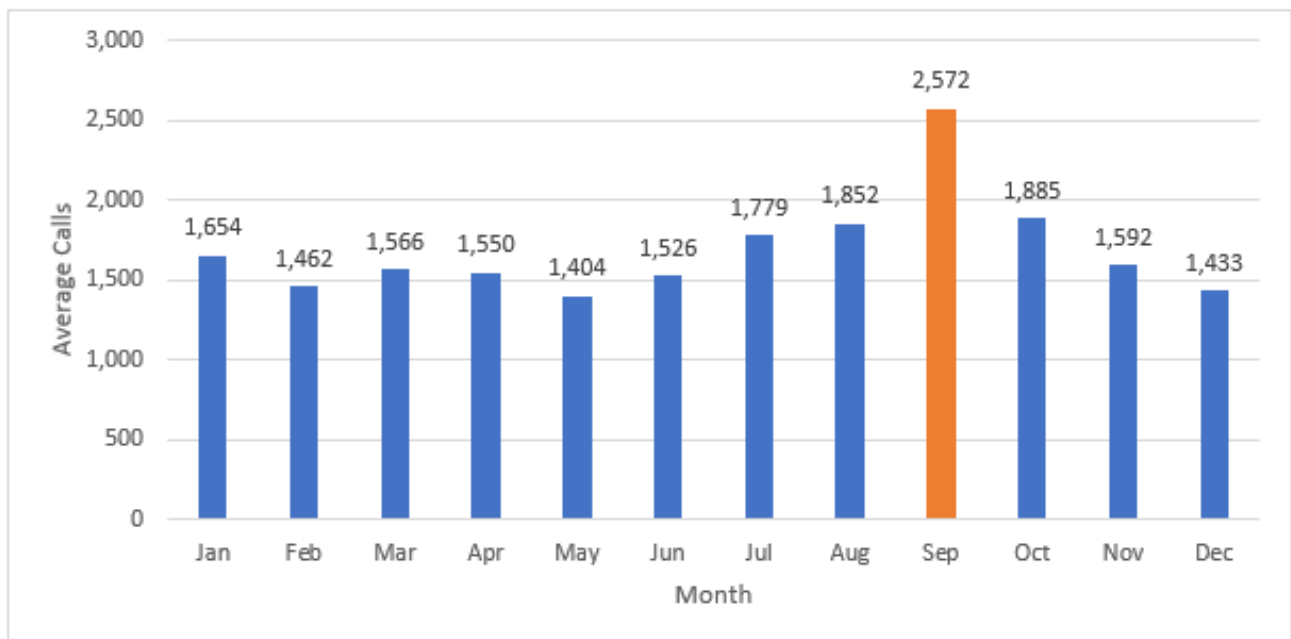
45

Trained call specialists answer calls at VIA LINK



The number of 211 calls also varies by month. On average over the past decade, call volume has reached its peak in September at the height of hurricane season, while reaching their minimum in May just before hurricane season begins. The greatest number of calls received during any month over the past decade was in September 2021, just after Hurricane Ida struck, when almost 8,950 calls were made, more than doubling the previous max in September 2012.

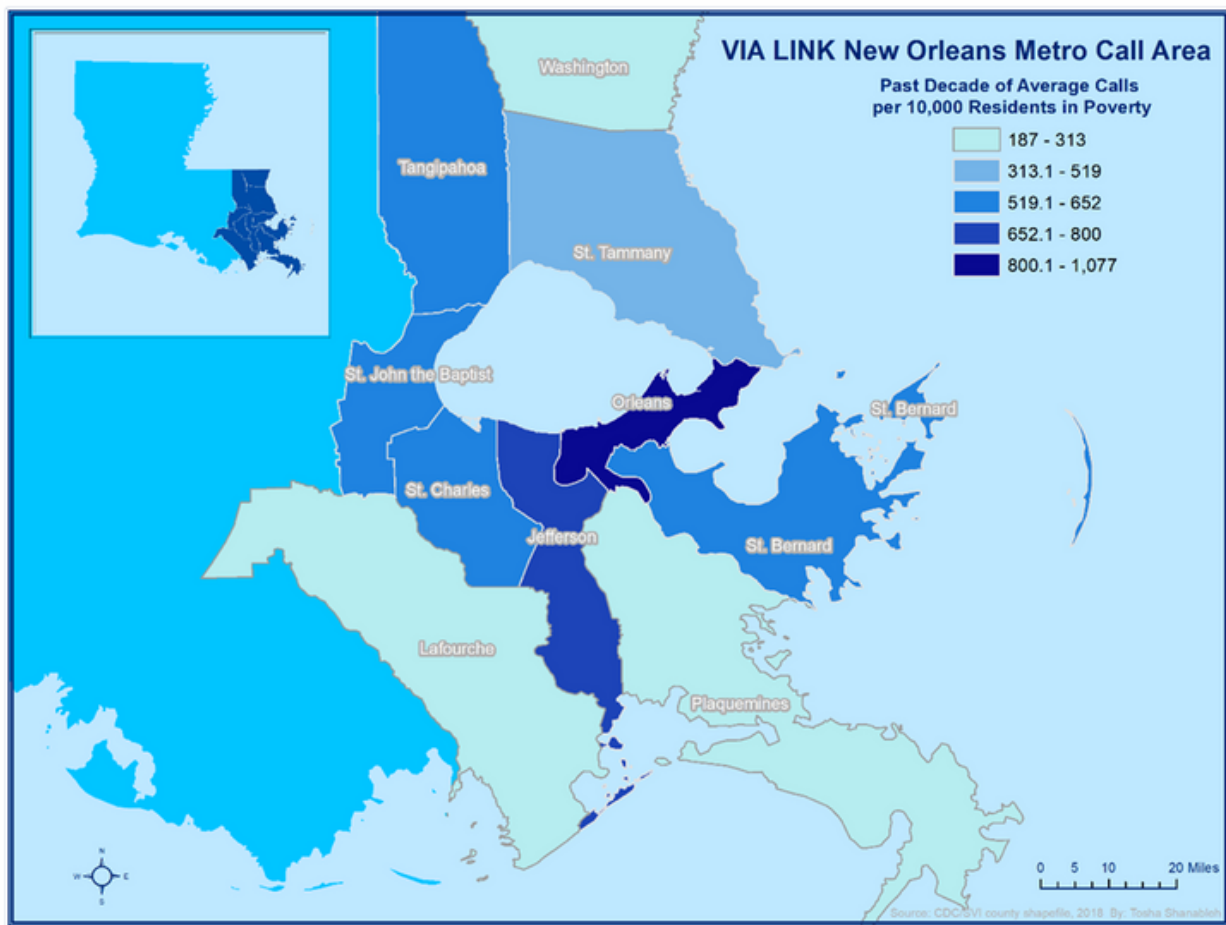
Figure 3. On average, calls reach their maximum each September during hurricane season.



CALLS BY PARISH

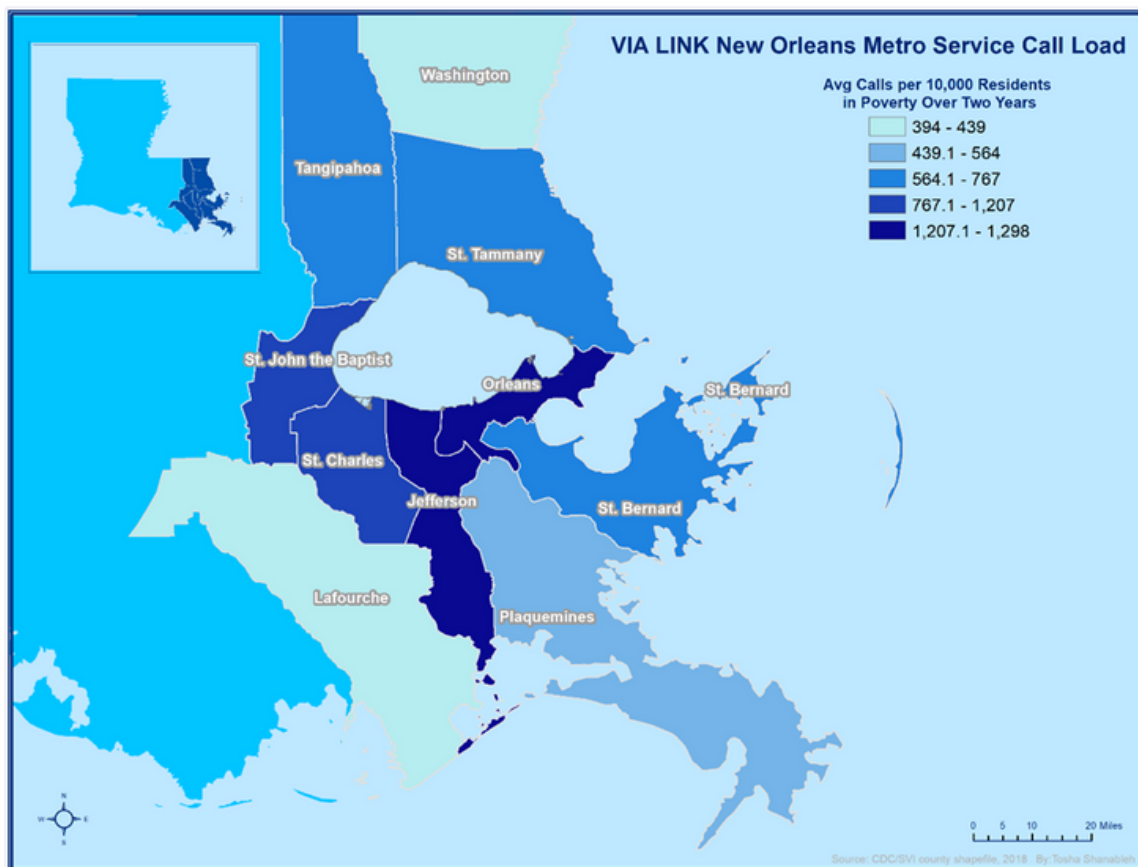
Across the ten-parish 211 region served by VIA LINK, the greatest number of annual calls on average over the past decade have come from residents of Orleans Parish. This trend holds when adjusting call volume for each parish's population size, overall and for population living in households earning total incomes below the federal poverty line, based on 2019 census data.

Figure 4. 211 callers most often live in Orleans Parish, even after adjusting for population.



Over the past two years, from 2020 to the end of 2021, the proportion of callers residing outside Orleans Parish increased markedly. The populations of Jefferson, Lafourche, St. John the Baptist, and St. Charles parishes were much more highly represented, largely due to the severe impact of Hurricane Ida in these areas. After adjusting for population living below the federal poverty line, Jefferson Parish is more highly represented than Orleans since 2020.

Figure 5. Since 2020, call volume has increased greatly from outside Orleans Parish.



Caller Demographics



VIA LINK collects basic demographic data on gender, age, race, and disability status from callers, and they have continuously enhanced their demographic data collection over time. That said, call specialists do not collect demographic information for every call. For example, if a caller was having a mental health crisis it may not be appropriate to ask them about their demographic information. Therefore, between 17% and 64% of the demographic categories were left blank on call reports during the period that was studied.

The research team compared caller demographics with those of the regional population according to [census data](#) for the New Orleans-Metairie-Hammond combined statistical area, which most closely resembles the ten-parish service region but also includes St. James parish and one rural county in Mississippi, and does not include Lafourche parish.

Figure 6. 211 callers over the past decade were disproportionately between age 40 and 60.

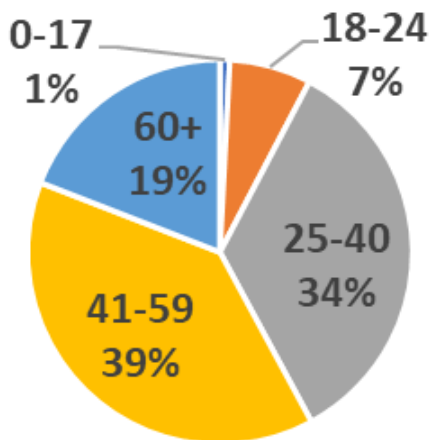
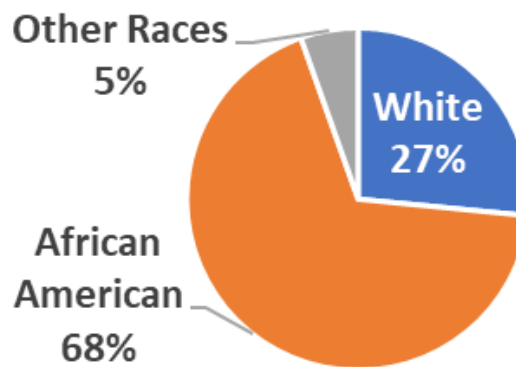


Figure 7. 211 callers over the past decade were disproportionately African American.



78%

Of callers identified as female.

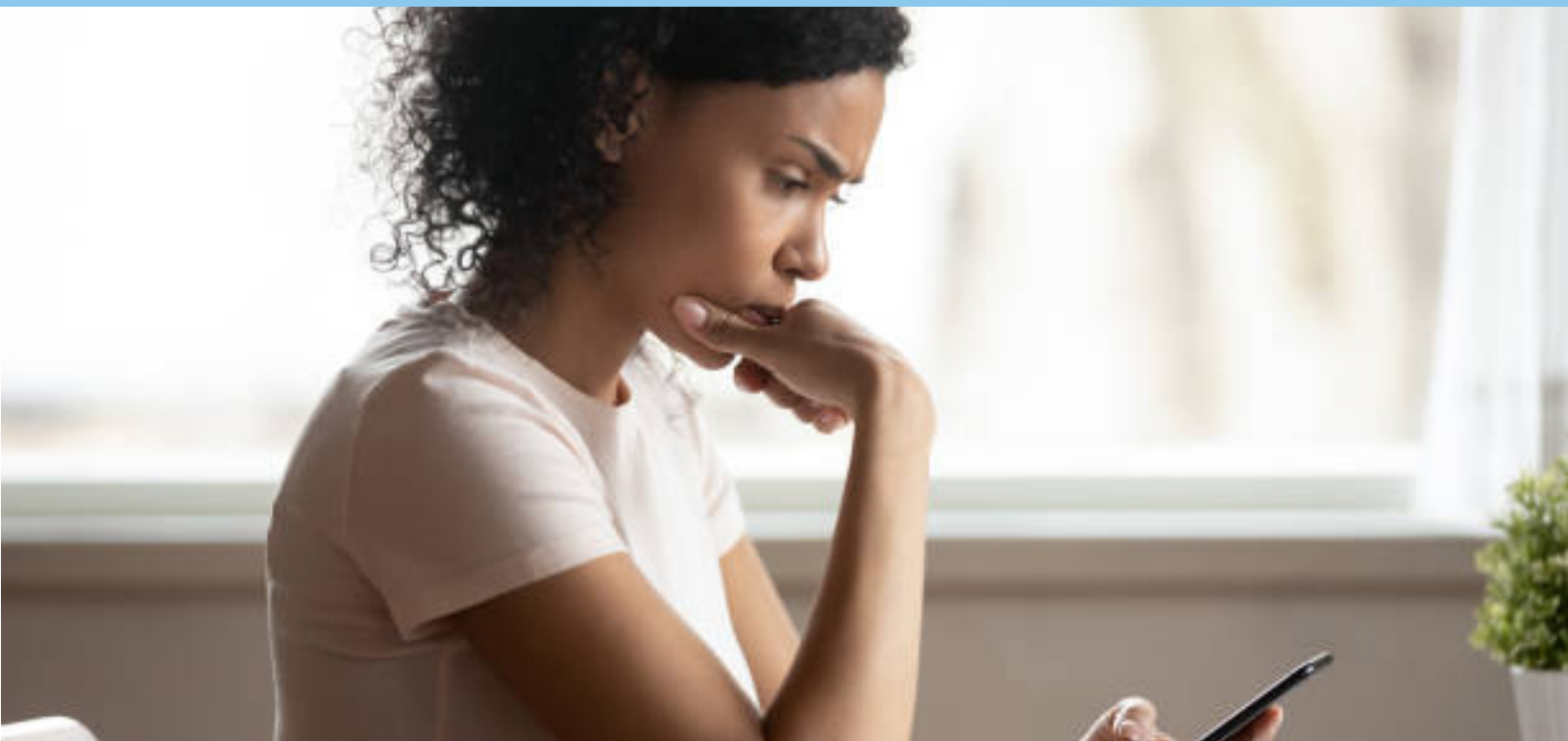
40%

Of callers identified as disabled.

Across the ten-year study period, in terms of gender, more than three-quarters (78%) of callers identified as female. In contrast, approximately 52% of residents in the region identify as female. Well over half (58%) of callers were over the age of 40, including a fifth (19%) over the age of 60. Only 8% of callers were under 25. In contrast, a slight majority (51%) of the regional population is below the age of 40, although 22% are over the age of 60. Therefore, callers are disproportionately female and between the age of 40 and 60, compared to the region overall.

In terms of disability status, a large proportion (40%) of callers who provided data identified as disabled in call reports. Two-thirds of callers over the decade studied (68%) identified as African American, while just over a quarter (27%) identified as White. In contrast, 54% of the regional population identifies as White, and 33% identify as Black. Therefore, callers are disproportionately African American, and may over represent people with disabilities as well.

What Are Callers' Greatest Needs?

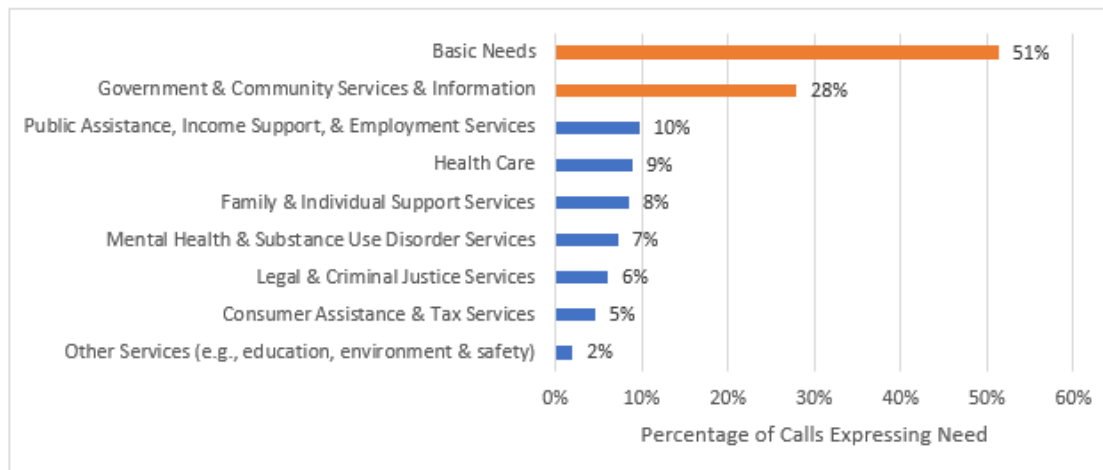


SHELTER AND FOOD AMONG MOST COMMON NEEDS

In call reports, VIA LINK's call specialists identify one or more needs based on the nature of the caller's request. The caller is then referred to one or more organization from VIA LINK's database of over 3,000 resources to help meet their needs. Needs are organized into hierarchical categories at five levels of increasing specificity, following a [nationally recognized taxonomy system](#).

At the most general level, more than half of all calls over the past decade (51%) sought assistance with basic needs for food, housing and shelter, material goods, transportation, and utilities, similar to 21Is nationally. More than a quarter of all callers over the period (28%) were seeking organizational and community services, particularly referrals to government agencies.

Figure 8. Callers most often sought help with basic needs followed by government referrals.



Top Needs

Electricity payment assistance

Emergency food

Rent payment assistance

Contacting government entities

Transitional housing and shelter

Food stamps

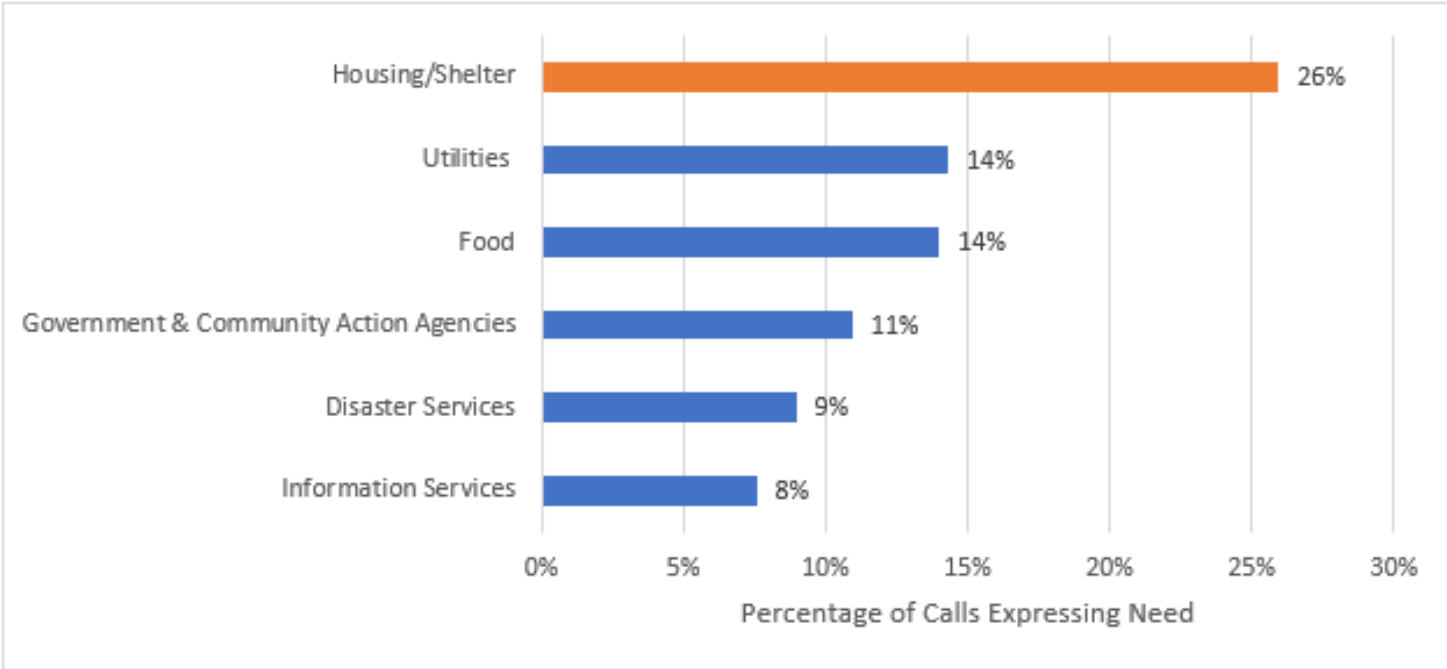
Agencies on aging

Tax assistance

Disaster food stamps

The top two categories of needs can be subdivided further. At this narrower level, the most common need was for housing and shelter, followed by utilities and food assistance. At the most specific level possible, the top needs expressed by callers were for help with electricity bills, emergency food, rent payment, contacting government entities, transitional housing and shelter, food stamps, contacting agencies on aging, tax assistance, and disaster food stamps.

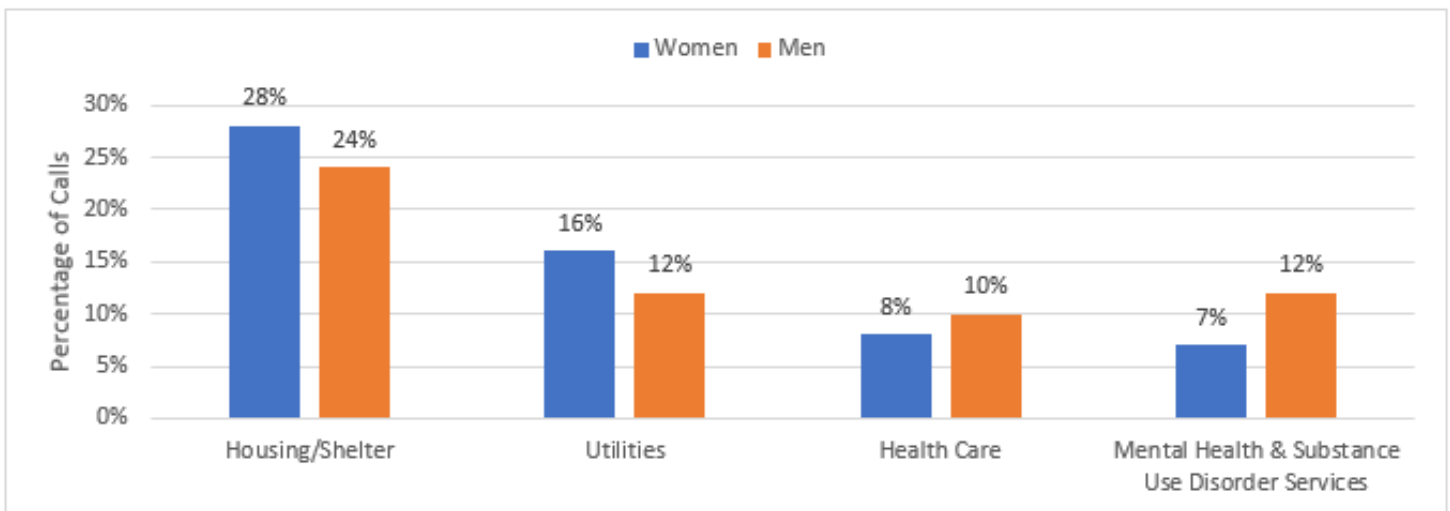
Figure 9. More specifically, callers most often sought assistance with housing and shelter.



NEEDS BY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUP

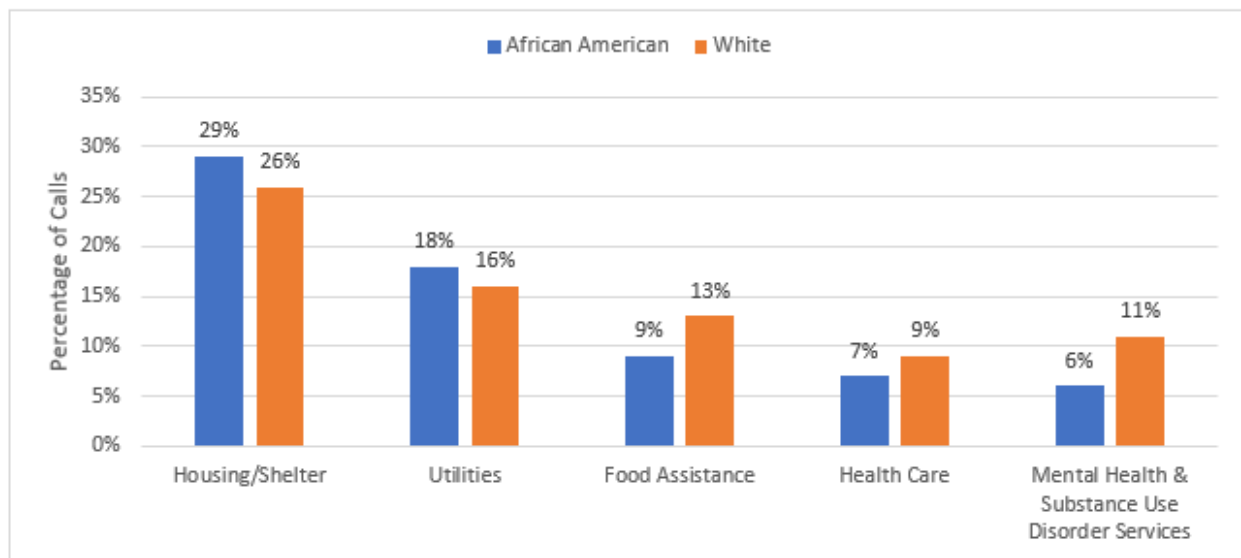
Women who called 211 over the past decade were slightly more likely than men to express basic needs for housing and shelter and utilities assistance. For instance, while 28% of female callers expressed housing and shelter needs, 24% of male callers did. However, men were more likely to express needs for health care and especially for mental health and substance use disorder services, including counseling, mental health facilities, and assessment and treatment.

Figure 10. Women had greater basic needs, while men had greater mental health needs.



African American callers over the past decade were slightly more likely to express needs for housing and shelter, and for utilities assistance. White callers were slightly more likely to express needs for food assistance, health care, and especially mental health and substance use disorder services. However, an even larger proportion of African American callers were women (83%) compared to White callers (72%), so these differences could be partially driven by gender.

Figure 11. African Americans called more for housing; Whites called more for mental health.



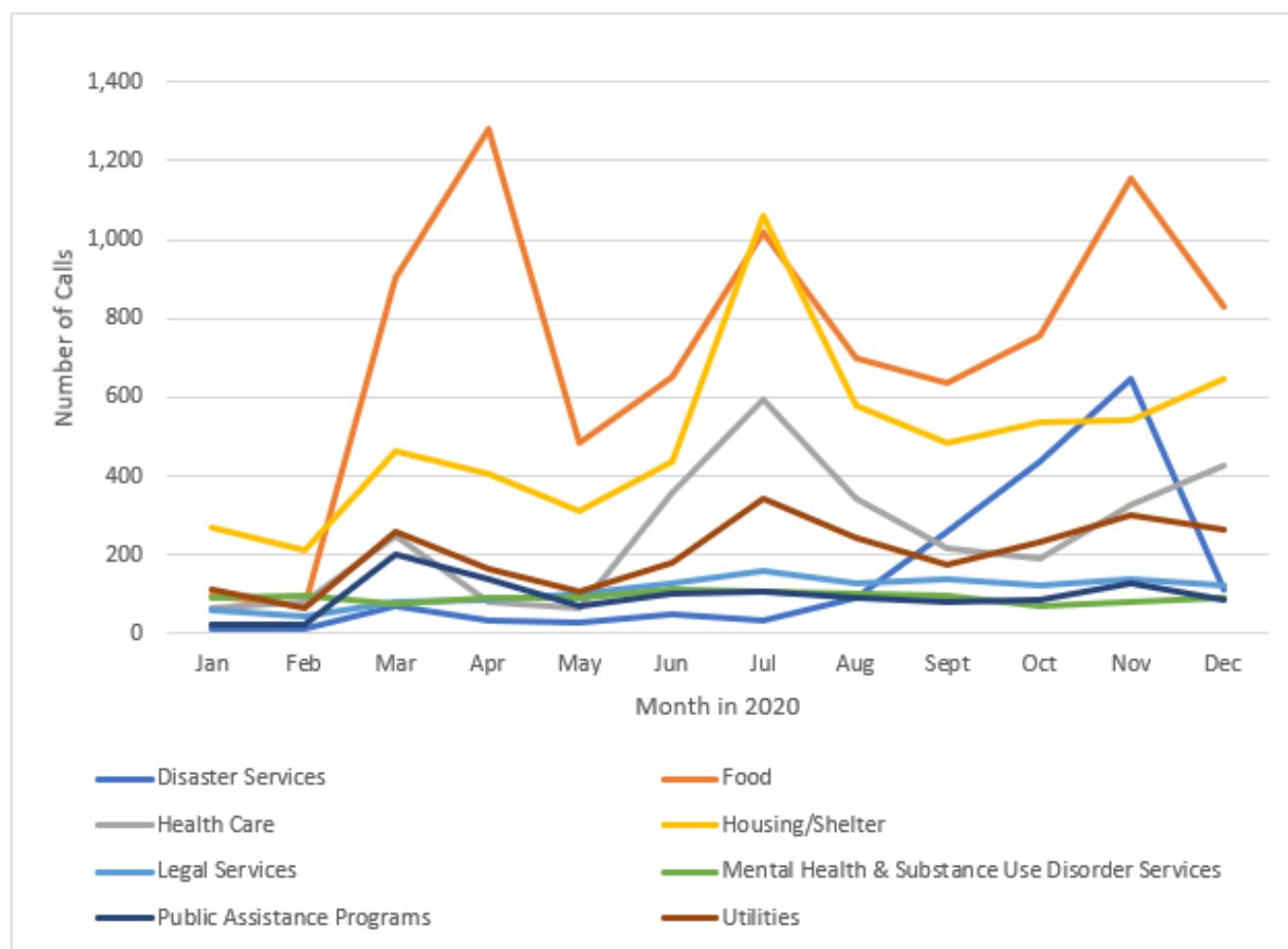
Callers who self-reported living with a disability were overrepresented among those seeking rehabilitation services (74%), social insurance programs (63%), specialized health care treatment (63%), transportation assistance (59%), legal assistance (54%), and money management and financial stability programs (53%). On the other hand, almost half (49%) of men were disabled, compared to 37% of women.

RECENT POST-DISASTER NEEDS

Calls to 211 in southeast Louisiana increased drastically in 2020 due to the COVID pandemic and its economic impact, as well as devastating hurricanes in late 2020.

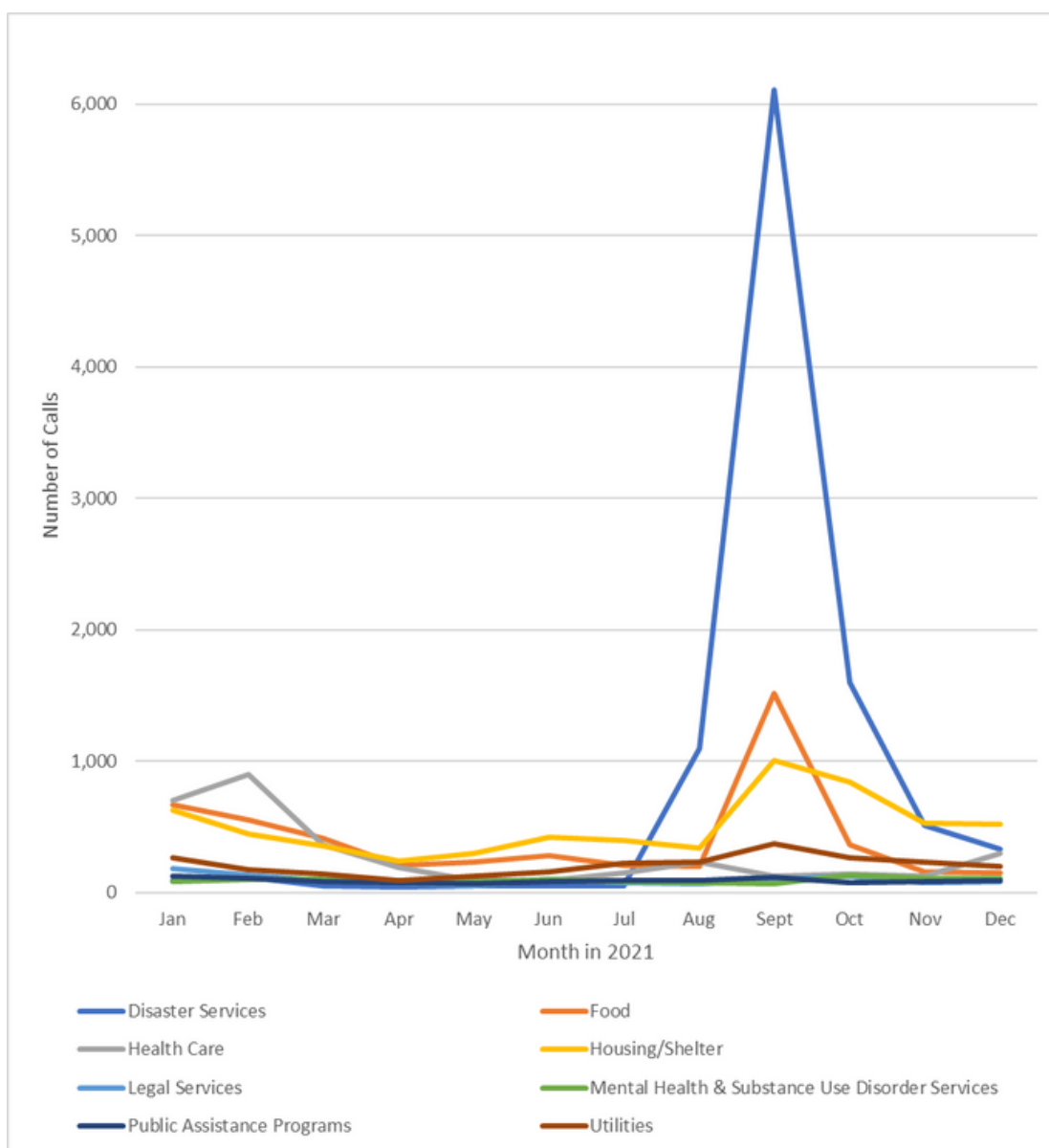
During 2020, the number of callers expressing basic needs jumped in the spring with the first outbreak of COVID, in summer at the peak of unemployment, and in late fall with a new COVID variant and multiple hurricanes. Needs for health care also followed these waves, as well as legal services and public assistance.

Figure 12. Basic and health care needs spiked seasonally during 2020.



In 2021, basic and health care needs started to stabilize in the first half of the year. However, when Hurricane Ida struck the region in late August, needs reached their peak. Calls for disaster services, which include both public and private disaster response and relief agencies and programs, jumped to 6,110 in September 2021, more than all other needs combined. Three months later at the end of the year, needs for housing and health care continued to be high.

Figure 13. In 2021, disaster service needs skyrocketed in September after Hurricane Ida.



POTENTIAL RESOURCE GAPS



TRACKING UNMET NEEDS

VIA LINK's 211 call specialists refer callers to specific organizations in their resource database according to the caller's needs. Specialists sometimes note when a caller's needs cannot be met, often due to a lack of resources or existing resources being at capacity. Although this data field is not used consistently, it provides some indication of potential resource gaps.

Since 2020, unmet needs most often relate to financial assistance, including funds for rent, electricity, and gas. Other unmet needs include shelter and food pantries. After multiple hurricanes, several disaster-related needs were unmet, including for post-disaster shelters, cleanup and debris removal, evacuation, and unemployment assistance. Finally, needs for community meals and vaccine information related to the COVID pandemic were sometimes unmet.

Top Unmet Needs

Financial assistance

Housing/shelter

Food assistance

Disaster services



MAPPING RESOURCES

VIA LINK has three full time resource specialists who are certified by AIRS and maintain the state's largest database of health and human services resources. While it is not possible to track every resource available at a given time because of issues like organizations frequently opening and closing, the database contains over 3,000 agencies and programs.

The research team used this database to map the locations of critical, in-person government and nonprofit community resources – including for housing and shelter, food assistance, and mental health and substance use disorder services – against Social Vulnerability Index ([SVI](#)) data for census tracts in the region.

The results were consistent across the resource type and imply that rural areas with high social vulnerability have the least accessibility to critical resources. Resources are clustered in cities where the population is greatest. Thus, in terms of geographic proximity, densely populated areas have the greatest accessibility to services, and sparsely populated areas have the least accessibility, although our methodology does not account for program sites' capacity. Noted in the table below are resource counts per parish. Often an agency could provide multiple services from one location.

Table 2. Jefferson, Orleans, and St. Tammany Parishes contain the most resources.

Parish	Food Assist Resources	Housing/ Shelter Resources	Mental Health & Substance Use Resources
Jefferson	43	29	118
Lafourche	20	6	11
Orleans	67	64	201
Plaquemines	8	3	19
St. Bernard	4	2	9
St. Charles	9	5	14
St. John the Baptist	5	1	18
St. Tammany	25	27	81
Tangipahoa	10	16	28
Washington	10	1	18

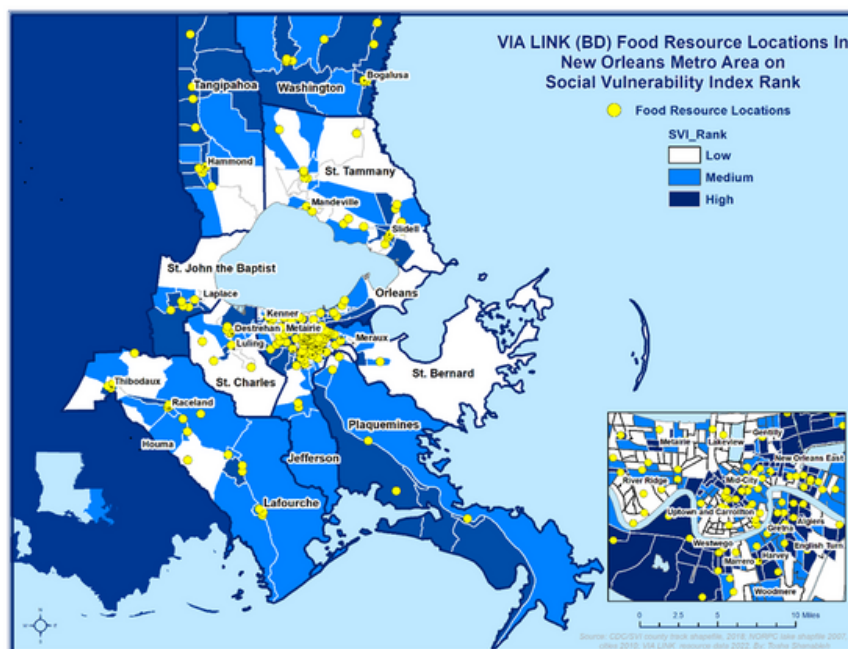
FOOD ASSISTANCE RESOURCE LOCATIONS

The food assistance map pinpoints the locations of facilities that people have to physically go to for services – for example, locations of emergency food centers that include brown bag food programs, commodity supplements, and community fridges that communities depended on during the COVID pandemic. Also plotted below are everyday food pantries and distribution centers.

The yellow data points are the food assistance sites overlaying the SVI rank. Tangipahoa and Washington Parishes show areas that do not have food assistance sites close to vulnerable populations. Lower Jefferson Parish with moderate vulnerability also lacks food assistance sites, suggesting a service gap. Identifying areas with high vulnerability reveals where and who needs support. It suggests the need for outreach strategies and new service locations, especially in extreme events.

The SVI data is color-coded according to a vulnerability index ranked Low, Medium, and High—the darker color symbolizing greater vulnerability.

Figure 14. Food pantries are concentrated around the New Orleans area.

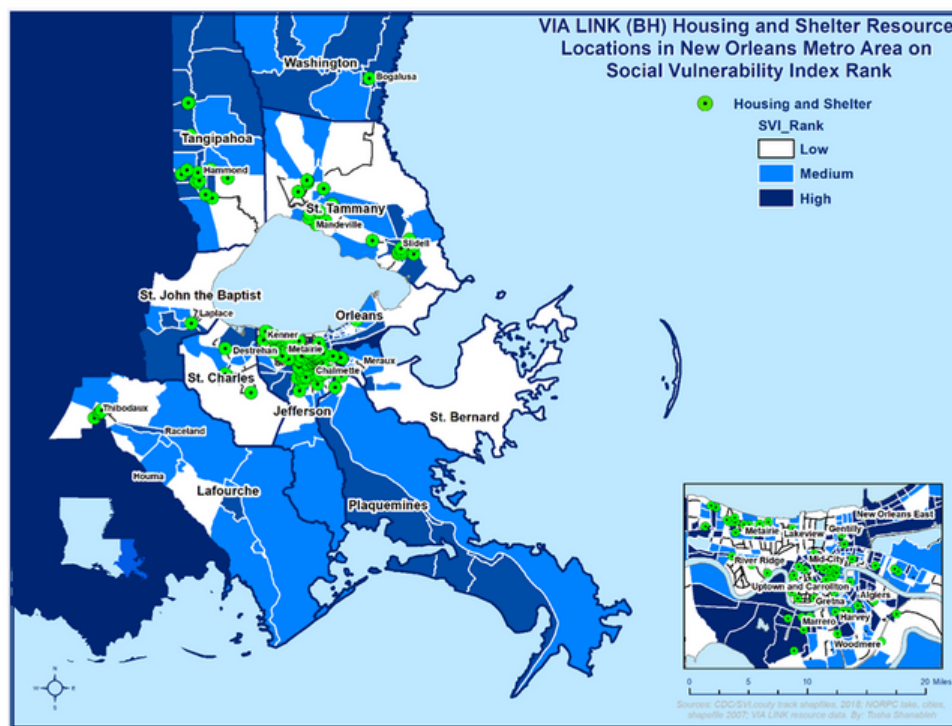


HOUSING AND SHELTER RESOURCE LOCATIONS

Resources for housing and shelter range from housing financial assistance to rapid re-housing for people who experience homelessness. Resources cover outreach programs for people at risk of homelessness and transitional or supportive housing. Agencies in this category also operate crisis shelters that provide temporary safe places for people affected by domestic violence, child abuse, and other threats.

The map illustrates that housing and shelter clearly lack resources outside major cities and are mainly centralized in Orleans Parish. It suggests that resource capacity might be challenged, especially for areas like Plaquemines Parish during a disaster. Identifying these disparities highlights a potential need for funding to expand capacity across rural areas and increase housing and shelter services to alleviate gaps.

Figure 15. Housing and shelter resources are lacking outside of major cities.

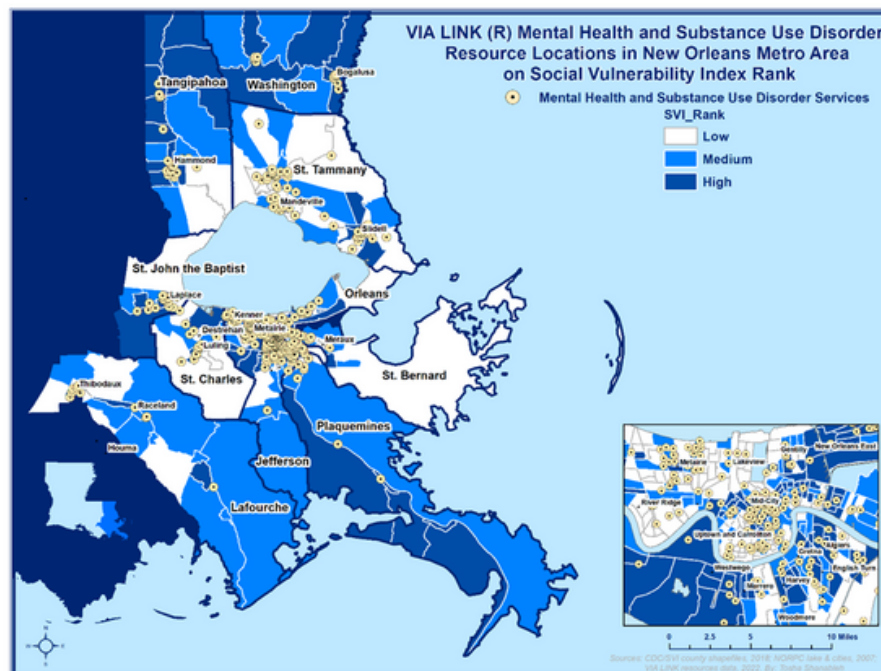


MENTAL HEALTHCARE AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER RESOURCE LOCATIONS

Since 1995, VIA LINK has been a provider of crisis assistance and suicide intervention. Today, the number of services for mental health and substance use disorders has grown, as has the ability to communicate with the community through text, online chat, and online resource directories. These platforms inform the public about resource availability and help them find support services, counseling, assessment, treatment, and other programs.

The map shows places where we know high social vulnerability exists, and outreach metrics for early detection of mental and substance use disorders can help mitigate prevalence. However, similar to other resource locations, resources are concentrated in densely populated cities, with gaps existing in rural areas.

Figure 16. Mental health and substance disorder program and facility locations are most densely clustered in Greater New Orleans.

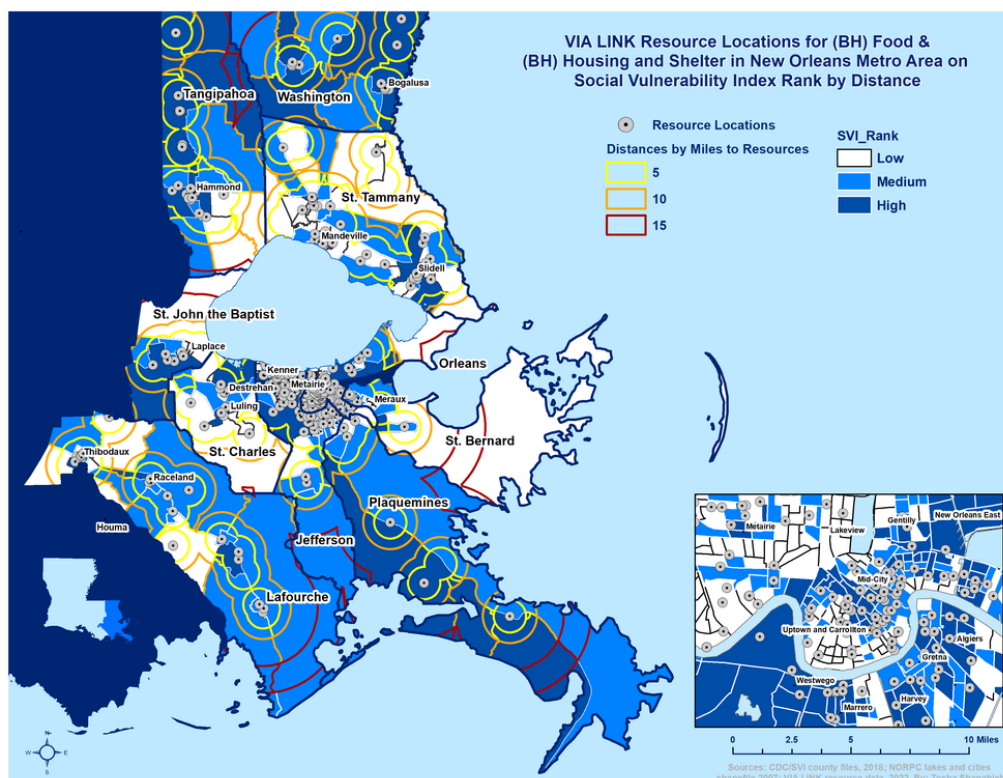


FOOD, HOUSING AND SHELTER RESOURCES BY DISTANCE

Identifying where resources are and where people need them is a vital first step in closing service gaps. In addition, people's efforts to reach resources have their limits. Rural areas have limited access to public and private transportation and they are often far away from services. Community members in highly vulnerable areas often do not have vehicles. That factor is weighted along with other social determinants in the Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) used in all of our maps. Social determinants are the circumstances in a place that affect the way people live, work, and thrive. Limited access to resources make rural residents vulnerable, especially during disasters.

This map considers how far a population must travel to resources. The green data points are food, shelter and housing resources, including some agencies that provide multiple services and programs at one location. The ring buffers show a population's proximity to resources at a specified distance of 5, 10, and 15 miles. The SVI rank considers the level of ease for people to reach services. The proximity of a 5-mile range or below suggests higher accessibility. The map shows that access to resources would likely be limited for residents of most rural areas.

Figure 17. Visualizing proximity, the red circles indicate limited access to vital resources



Conclusion and Recommendations



Conclusion



VIA LINK's 211 call data over the past decade show that the organization is a critical part of the human services infrastructure in southeast Louisiana. Calls to 211 spike during and after hurricanes and public health emergencies like the COVID pandemic. During disasters the number of people who request help increases dramatically, but the type of services they request still has a large focus on housing and shelter, food, and utility assistance.

211 callers are disproportionately female, African American, over the age of 40, and living with a disability, compared to the regional population overall. Residents of parishes outside Orleans are increasingly calling 211 in recent years, particularly after Hurricane Ida struck these areas. White and male residents call 211 for mental health and substance use disorder services more often than their female and African American counterparts.

The most common unmet needs for callers are financial assistance, housing and shelter, and food. Unmet needs post disaster are similar but also include cleanup, debris removal, and evacuation after hurricanes, and vaccine information during the COVID pandemic. Mapping data suggests that socially vulnerable rural parts of the region have the most potential to be underserved by existing organizations in VIA LINK's resource database.

Recommendations for Service Providers, Government Agencies and Foundations

1

Seek opportunities to expand services to underserved rural areas.

Findings from this study suggest that socially vulnerable rural parts of Southeast Louisiana are most likely to be underserved by existing resources, especially for in-person services like housing and shelter, food assistance, and mental health care. Consider how agencies might increase their presence in remote parts of the region, such as through mobile units and outreach.

Foundations should consider giving strategies that support all aspects of the needs identified in this report, including expansion of accessible community-based services and high quality contact center services.

2

Sign up to join VIA LINK's resource database if not already included.

With over 3,000 agencies and programs, VIA LINK's resource directory is the largest in Louisiana, but it can always expand further. Agencies can request to be added to the database [here](#). Resources in rural areas are especially needed.

3

Help promote 211 to clients and community members.

Residents often need a variety of services, and community-based organizations benefit from partnering with each other to meet as many of residents' needs as possible. By informing clients about 211, you can help them access other services.

4

Make creative use of VIA LINK's data dashboards or request tailored analyses.

There are many more uses for VIA LINK's data than are represented in this report. The data is most useful when analysis is tailored to the specific questions and service area of an agency. Contact VIA LINK for guidance on tailored analysis.



Recommendations for VIA LINK

1 Increase outreach to men, as well as younger and rural residents.

More than three-quarters (78%) of 211 callers in the region are female, compared to 52% of the region's inhabitants. Callers were also disproportionately over the age of 40 and live in Orleans Parish (and increasingly Jefferson Parish). VIA LINK should consider targeted outreach to underrepresented residents in the community to increase their awareness and comfort level with calling 211 for basic support services in disaster and non-disaster times. Traditional marketing strategies like advertising, as well as visible partnerships with trusted community-based public and nonprofit organizations, may serve this purpose.

2

Expand partnerships with state and local government agencies to increase caller referrals to 211.

VIA LINK maintains the largest resource directory in the state, which is continuously updated by trained specialists. This directory is an important asset for state and local government to better serve residents of the region. VIA LINK already partners with the State of Louisiana to provide emergency services through 211 during disasters. Similar partnerships may be possible with 911 services, so that calls for mental health assistance are routed to trained crisis professionals rather than the police.

3

Continue improving the consistency and detail of anonymous data collection.

VIA LINK collects valuable demographic data from callers, but it must balance the value of data collection with callers' concerns about confidentiality and feelings of safety. VIA LINK might enhance its data collection while maintaining this balance by aligning its demographic data collection (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, parish) with that of the U.S. Census Bureau. This would allow for direct comparison to Census data. In turn, VIA LINK would be able to better identify gaps in who they serve, improve outreach, and pinpoint needs of specific communities.



Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by the UNO research team of Professor Steve Mumford and MPA candidate Tosha Shanableh, with the support and guidance of Andrew Holbein, VIA LINK's Director of Resources and Data, and LaVondra Dobbs, VIA LINK's President and CEO.

We wish to thank the call specialists who painstakingly collect data through 211 and other services, making this study possible. We also thank the thousands of community organizations that serve southeast Louisiana through disasters and hardships.

We hope this report inspires additional analysis of VIA LINK's data to generate actionable insights for meeting our region's needs.



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