



The Importance of Data Integrity in the Homeless Services Sector

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THE POWER OF ACCURATE DATA FOR RESEARCH

Data is a critical aspect of maintaining the integrity of research. Systematic data collection allows for the measurement of the interactions between variables of interest that enable individuals to answer research questions, test hypotheses, and evaluate outcomes (Research Integrity, 2022). Such data collection enables effective research to help individuals make informed decisions, improve the lives of others, find solutions to policy problems, and enable effective provision of resources. Data is also essential to estimating patterns in homelessness and combating its growth (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2022). By measuring the extent to which homelessness has been exacerbated, analysts and researchers can propose informed and effective solutions to ending homelessness by providing services to those most vulnerable. The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is a database that allows organizations to compile client-level, system-wide information on the services they provide to people at risk of homelessness and individuals experiencing homelessness (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, 2022). The Point-In-Time Count, another major data source, occurs on a single night, or several successive nights, and aims to estimate the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in a community that includes sheltered and unsheltered populations (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012). Data from HMIS and the Point-In-Time Count allow policymakers to strategically allocate funds and advocate on demographics, trends, and causes of homelessness, as well as the availability and usage of services among the populations experiencing homelessness (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2022).

Data can also be used to identify individuals who are currently experiencing homelessness or at risk of experiencing homelessness for the provision of services tailored to individual needs. California Policy Lab and the University of Chicago Poverty Lab collaborated with Los Angeles County to mine over 85 million service records in various programs (Painter & Weare, 2020). Data Mining is the process of finding patterns and correlations with a large sample set of data to predict outcomes (SAS Analytics, 2022). Researchers from the California Policy Lab and the University of Chicago Poverty Lab identified individuals that are up to approximately 48% more likely to fall into homelessness than the average person. They also identified approximately 1% of Los Angeles County's most vulnerable and targeting these individuals with adequate resources could prevent 6,900 occasions of homelessness per year (Painter & Weare, 2020). This type of data mining can recognize problems, find possible causes, and work to identify solutions.

The work of Built for Zero, a non-profit organization, exemplifies the usefulness of accurate data for aiding applied research. Built for Zero is a non-profit movement of more than 90 communities that work to end homelessness (Community Solutions, 2022). The non-profit uses real-time, by-name data to locate people experiencing homelessness and connect them with local agencies and services to help them find housing. Built for Zero has used data to end homelessness among military veterans in Abilene, Texas (Broom, 2019) and has placed approximately 96,000 people experiencing homelessness into permanent housing across the country (Broom, 2019). Built for Zero, and other collaborative endeavors like it, would not be able to locate and connect nearly as many people experiencing homelessness if provider agencies did not keep detailed and accurate records.

THE POWER OF ACCURATE DATA FOR INDIVIDUALS

Entering consistently accurate data into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) helps agencies provide the necessary services to people experiencing homelessness. High-quality data provides individuals working in the homeless sector with the information needed to identify individuals at risk and support those experiencing homelessness (Making the Shift, 2021). HMIS provides substantial opportunities to improve access to, and delivery of, services for people experiencing homelessness. It offers important benefits at the participant, program, and system levels. If accurate information about a participant is kept in HMIS, providers are much better able to locate that person when appropriate housing or services become available. At the program level, providers and their funders can examine enrollments and exit data to understand which programmatic features are successful and which might not be helping participants as much. Individuals at risk or currently experiencing homelessness then indirectly benefit from these service improvements because they are more likely to receive the most impactful service referrals and coordinated case management (Spellman et al., 2002).

The link between HMIS and the Los Angeles County Coordinated Entry System (CES) underscores the importance of quality data in the ability to maximize housing and service resources. CES aims to connect the most vulnerable persons in the community to limited, available housing and supportive services in Los Angeles (LAHSA, 2022). The data collected through HMIS works with the prioritization strategies of CES to enable agencies and outreach workers to locate, assess, and connect the most vulnerable people experiencing homelessness to the right services or housing that will help end their experience of homelessness and keep them stably housed (Kelkar et al., 2019). Inputting accurate data is essential because, without it, there may be delays in services for individuals experiencing homelessness or individuals may be matched with resources that are not the right fit for their needs.

Data can also be used to identify inequalities within service providers. For example, the Los Angeles Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness combined data from different communities and found that while Black and white people received the similar levels of services, Black people fell out of permanent supportive housing faster than their counterparts (Painter & Weare, 2020). Once these inequities are identified, providers and system administrators are better able to adjust service provision to reach more equitable outcomes and stable housing across demographic groups.

IMPROVEMENTS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Vulnerability Index — Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) is a survey given to families and children to assess their risk and assist them (CT HMIS, 2022). Some questions on the survey request basic information such as name, age, history of homelessness, and wellness. While the VI-SPDAT aims to assess participant vulnerability to help providers place individuals into housing and connect them to adequate support services, many providers and researchers have highlighted its flaws. Courtney Cronley reported that the VI-SPDAT assesses vulnerability among white women based on trauma and abuse but fails to evaluate similar experiences among Black women accurately. She states that white women score the highest on the assessment; however, while Black women report similar levels of abuse and trauma, they score significantly lower. There is distinct evidence of racial bias on the VI-SPDAT, negatively affecting Black women experiencing homelessness. This places Black women experiencing homelessness at risk of not receiving prompt housing or services that address their needs (Cronley, 2020). A recent report noted that Indigenous, Black, and people of color were 32% less likely than their white counterparts to receive a high score on the assessment (Wilkey et al., 2019). The VI-SPDAT needs to be reassessed to and adjusted to counter some of the existing problematic patterns in assessing acuity, such as reinforcing racial biases. By making the VI-SPDAT more trauma informed, data can be more accurate and consistent for both survivors and other participants, all while treating those individuals with dignity and compassion.

Another improvement to making data more accurate and consistent is entering data promptly; this can potentially reduce human error, which can occur when too much time has passed between service provision and data entry (Munoz, 2022). When data is collected and processed on time, outreach workers and providers more readily have access to information that can help locate or connect people experiencing homelessness or at risk with services at a faster rate. One primary challenge providers have in recording accurate data is when clients provide false information due to fear of being tracked (Department of Housing and Development, 2005). In addition to fears, the experience of homelessness itself can be very traumatizing, and the process of intake/evaluation can be re-traumatizing, leading individuals to withhold or share less-than-accurate information. To address these issues, providers should not only inform the clients of the goals of HMIS and how collection of data can help support them and connect them to permanent housing or supportive services like job training, family reunification, and substance abuse counseling (Department of Housing and Development, 2005) but also build trust, so that clients feel more comfortable and willing to share crucial personal information.

Hiring and retaining workers who build this trust effectively is another opportunity to improve data quality. Most outreach workers are Black and Brown individuals that have experienced homelessness (Bellman & Broslawsky, 2022). Outreach workers have expressed several concerns when working within the homelessness services sector. Some concerns include low wages, a lack of clear communication and direction from management (Bellman & Broslawsky, 2022). Addressing these concerns can help retain high quality service providers. Another challenge to recording accurate data is the rapidly increasing caseload which causes capacity issues for service providers. For example, within the first two years



of Measure H's implementation, it infused approximately \$661 million of funding into the Homeless Service System. With an extensive increase in funding, service providers were required to scale up their operations. This led to several issues such as physical space and technology, staff recruitment, training, and retention, organizational infrastructure, and client-level data management (Abt Associates, 2019). When providers are struggling to serve all assigned participants within a work day, accurate and time-consuming data entry may be difficult to prioritize. Including current workers in the hiring process and in conversations surrounding decision-making would aid in creating open communication between frontline workers and management. Addressing the concerns of workers can also potentially aid in higher retention rates among service providers who understand the value of maintaining current, accurate data. Their presence in provider organizations can strengthen the culture of responsible data entry which will improve the homeless services system and improve placements for their clients.

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ABOUT THE HOMELESSNESS POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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OUR VALUES

Infuse **equity and cultural humility** into all aspects of HPRI research, conversations and convenings. Uplift **collaboration** both between researchers from different backgrounds and institutions and from the research community to the policy and practice communities.

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