

# CALCULATING CHANGE: Future Directions for Homelessness Data Use and Reporting

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Data plays a big role in the modern world. Retailers regularly use the information they collect to predict what items a customer will need or want in the future. These efforts improve their bottom line, overall sales. Political candidates utilize available information about citizens and their views on issues. It improves their bottom line: accumulating enough votes to win elections. People who work in human services, including homelessness, must work in similar ways. ***We must improve how we use data to advance our bottom line—reducing and ending homelessness.***

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), states, and Continuums of Care (CoCs) have been making important strides forward in recent years to improve data collection and analysis, often with limited resources. However, work in this space is not done.

To advance the conversation on data use and reporting reforms, the Alliance sought input from partnering organizations, held a forum at its national conference, engaged various Alliance workgroups, and held a series of Zoom-based open forums with members of its network. What follows reflects the collective wisdom of members of the homeless services field.

## PURPOSE

Data reform efforts could have varying types of goals. This report focuses on generating and reporting data that:

- 1) informs improvements to service delivery; and
- 2) sheds light on resource gaps (thus opening doors to efforts to fill those gaps).

Notably, the purpose of these proposals is not to uncover information to be used to penalize workers, service providers, or systems. Those are not reasonable uses of the suggested data collection or reporting. Unreasonable or ill-intentioned use of such data must be addressed in the same ways that it is for current data collection within homelessness and beyond.

# DEMOCRATIZING ACCESS TO DATA

In many communities, only a limited number of CoC employees have access to homeless system data. Meanwhile, many other entities and people are daily making decisions that impact efforts to end homelessness—they include government agencies, non-profit organizations, legislators, researchers, advocates, and others. The decisions and contributions of these other actors should be fully informed. Reaching this goal requires democratizing access to data. More homelessness data must be publicly available for everyone to use.

The benefits of public data are varied. For example, it feeds cross-entity collaborations on strategy, goal setting, planning, implementation, and progress monitoring. Equal access to data can also have implications for racial equity. When leaders (including people of color and others who are too often excluded from power positions) have access to information, they are positioned to produce better results through their work. A recent [study of the homeless services workforce](#) in Los Angeles uncovered professionals of color who identified greater data access as a factor that would help in advancing their careers.

These upsides of democratizing access to data are also associated with concerns about how data will be handled by new users. Homeless services systems have records that may contain information about private matters including mental health conditions, domestic violence experiences, substance use, or immigration status. If such data is tied to particular clients and made available to an expansive list of users, individuals' privacy would be violated. Further, some stakeholders fear that data could be used by bad actors to misrepresent the work of individual systems or broader efforts to end homelessness. Relevant concerns should help shape policy around data reforms—for example, anonymizing data and prescribing which data points will be publicly released is important.

Certain steps can be taken to further the goal of democratizing access.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

Ensure that each CoC makes homeless system data publicly available in the communities they serve

Currently, a subset of CoCs (and states) regularly publish data dashboards and charts on public websites. Such efforts are not required nor is there any guidance about what types of information should be included.

HUD has invested in Stella P, a technological tool that converts CoC data into standardized visualizations. But Stella P access is often limited to a small number of CoC administrators. HUD has been exploring the possibility of making Stella P publicly available. HUD should ensure that Stella P visualizations for each CoC are public facing and available through community-based websites (known and accessible to those working or interested in ending homelessness in the community). Additionally, CoCs (and states) should be encouraged in the continued creation of jurisdiction-specific dashboards. And HUD should offer some guidance on types of data it would be helpful to share.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

### Expand the use of interactive charts within federal-level reports on homelessness

HUD currently presents most of its data in 1) static charts embedded within text-based reports or 2) Excel spreadsheets. These formats limit the quantity of available information, but also its functional use. For example, users (often researchers and data analysts) perform their own calculations to obtain useful information.

One exception to this rule is the agency's public reporting of System Performance Measures (SPMs). Using data visualization software, it offers a series of interactive charts. In general, such charts can be more user-friendly than a spreadsheet while allowing readers to access greater amounts of data.

HUD should expand its use of interactive charts within the AHAR Parts 1 and 2 and potentially other reports. This would allow a broader array of users to access more data in easier-to-use formats. Meanwhile, it should continue to make raw data available for use by researchers and data analysts.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

### Support efforts to ease client access to their own case files and data

The benefits of client access to information can be diverse and far-reaching. When systems work to improve participant experiences, including easing access to case files, it helps build trust between systems and clients. Ease of access also allows clients to correct inaccuracies when they see them. Finally, such efforts can be a vehicle for improved communication about future appointments, newly available housing matches, and other information.

Some CoCs have been experimenting with phone apps that make it easier for clients to access their own case files. Currently, this approach may be cost prohibitive for budget-strapped systems, but there may be ways to reduce costs or other ways of achieving this goal could be identified. The use of such practices is currently not widespread.

A subset of CoCs should implement and test approaches to expand client access. These activities should be evaluated and used to inform future technical assistance, guidance, and the development of new funding opportunities for such work and other data-related reforms.

## IMPROVE THE FIELD'S ABILITY TO IDENTIFY AND RESPOND TO CHALLENGES

Communities collect and maintain information about people experiencing homelessness in a database called the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Once a year, HUD requires communities to transfer HMIS data in the form of a Longitudinal System Analysis (LSA) report. The reports respond to a set of pre-defined questions. Essentially, they provide counts of people falling into specified categories—for example, the total number of people aged 65 and over who stayed in their shelters in 2022.

The overall counts (or aggregate data) in LSAs are limited pieces of information. And these limited pieces of information comprise much of what HUD knows about key issues related to people experiencing homelessness and the systems that serve them. By extension, this information comprises all that can be easily known by policymakers, advocates, researchers, and CoCs seeking to learn about other systems.

It is difficult to do national or regional analysis that goes beyond the requested data points (even as communities have far more information available to them). And the process supports the idea of only examining community data once a year.

This process of data collection limits the field's ability to use data to identify existing and emerging challenges across communities. The missing information could help HUD direct available resources, provide technical assistance, or inform Congress of homeless services system needs. It could also help other stakeholders contribute to solutions.



## **RECOMMENDATION:**

A committee of stakeholders should 1) reevaluate the information CoCs are sharing for data analysis and research purposes and 2) explore the possibility of person-level data collection.

In recent years, the homeless services field has been paying increasing attention to subpopulations uniquely at risk of homelessness (e.g., older adults and people of color), pathways through homelessness, and homeless services outcomes. As a part of these efforts, HUD has been updating required data collection related to race and gender, essentially ensuring the collection of more detailed information about an individual's identity.

These changes create an opportune time to revisit the types of information communities are sharing for data analysis and research purposes. A deliberative body of experts should be established to develop and weigh recommendations. Group members should be diverse, including CoC leaders, workers responsible for data collection, people with lived experience, and advocates.

These experts should have a dual mission. First, they should reconsider the data points required as a part of the LSA reports that form the basis of HUD's annual reports.

Second, the group should reconsider ideas for the nationwide collection of person-level data. Person-level data are the records for each person in a community's database. In addition to its current work, person-level information would allow governmental and non-governmental agencies to investigate a practically endless set of research questions. However, there are risks to this approach and the field should proceed with caution and careful thought, including input from people whose data is captured in these systems.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

More CoCs should examine and share their HMIS data more frequently than once a year.

A diverse subset of CoCs has been electing to share data more than once a year. A few examples include [Tarrant County, Texas](#) (quarterly reporting) and [New York City](#) (monthly and daily reporting). The type of information provided varies from community to community.

HUD or a non-governmental agency should research this practice. How many communities are engaging in more than once-a-year reporting? What types of information are they sharing? How are they sharing and using their data? What barriers prevent more communities from engaging in this practice? The answers to such questions should inform policy and technical assistance efforts that expand the number of communities regularly reporting data more than once a year.

# WORKFORCE

During the height of the pandemic, the Alliance conducted a [series of surveys and focus groups](#) with homeless services system leaders to better understand how the health crisis was impacting people experiencing homelessness and the delivery of services. One theme that consistently emerged was widespread staffing shortages. A [2021 survey](#) of the nation's non-profit organizations indicates that these challenges extend beyond homeless services—significant job vacancy rates were reported across sectors.

These challenges likely pre-dated the pandemic. Available evidence suggests that, in general, non-profits struggle with [worker shortages](#) rooted in competition with higher-paying employers and insufficient childcare options. Homeless services sector employees also [typically have low pay](#) and can find it [difficult to manage](#) high caseloads and the emotional stress of serving a high-need population.

When non-profits don't have enough workers, it impacts their ability to function properly and effectively serve people in need. Some organizations report [cutting or reducing services](#). Indeed, Alliance-led focus groups indicated that staffing shortages [hindered efforts](#) to connect people experiencing homelessness to permanent housing during the pandemic.

Workforce concerns impact service delivery and efforts to end homelessness. Therefore, they should be included in data collection and goal-setting efforts. And progress in this area should be monitored.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

HUD should regularly and publicly report workforce data.

Current federal reporting highlights the ability of systems to serve people in need. It answers questions such as: 1) how many shelter beds are available, or 2) how many people are accessing permanent housing?

Staffing is another significant factor that illustrates a system's capacity to serve people. Further, it is helpful context for understanding system performance (i.e., data points such as average lengths of stay in programs and successful exits to housing). Workforce health and stability likely play a role in such outcomes.

The federal government should begin regularly and publicly reporting basic data on staffing, including staffing ratios (staff counts compared to the number of people experiencing homelessness) and average tenure. Other factors, such as average salaries and employee demographics, should also be considered.

# GROUP-SPECIFIC REFORMS

In recent years, the homelessness field has been increasingly seeking to understand trends and disparities impacting certain sub-populations (including older adults and people of color). HUD, states, and CoCs have been actively reforming data collection and reporting to reflect these shifts. Work in these spaces continues to evolve.

## OLDER ADULTS

The share of older adults being served in the nation's shelters is [on the rise](#) and [continued growth](#) is projected through the end of the decade. Beginning in 2023, HUD is requiring communities to [ask for age information](#) that will allow for reporting on the size of the group as a part of the annual Point-in-Time Count. Thus, new types of data are forthcoming. The Alliance's discussions with the field suggest still further possibilities for improvement.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

HUD should expand available analysis on older adults.

Current AHAR reporting is extensive and provides an overview of various aspects of homelessness. Adding more to that process could be onerous while failing to give older adults sufficient attention and consideration.

HUD, alone or in conjunction with partners, should periodically (e.g., every 2 years) produce an ad hoc report solely focused on older adult homelessness. New reporting should offer a deeper analysis of the population than the current Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) Part 1 and 2. Such material would be greatly enriched by the availability of person-level data for people staying in shelters. For example, it would allow for insights at intersections of identity such as older adult women or older adult American Indian men.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

The homeless services field should pilot ways to incorporate Activities of Daily Living (ADL) questions into service models.

Age-related declines can impact the accessibility and sustainability of housing solutions. Activities of Daily Living (ADL) assessments are an important avenue for understanding any challenges being experienced by unhoused older adults. They should inform individual case planning. And aggregate data on ADLs should inform policy—for example, knowledge of the number of people who could potentially benefit from assisted living or aging in place supports is useful when policymakers are making resource decisions.

Government or non-governmental agencies should collect information about how systems are currently using ADLs or similar types of assessments. CoCs should pilot ways of incorporating assessments into their work on homelessness. Possibilities include incorporating assessments at coordinated entry and within HMIS. Impacts and any unintended negative consequences (e.g., the potential of overburdening participants with too many questions) should be evaluated.

## PEOPLE OF COLOR

Historically, advocates and others have promoted [colorblind narratives](#) about homelessness. However, the field is shifting away from that approach and towards a focus on [targeted universalism](#) and the racial dynamics of this critical societal challenge. One underlying assumption is that accurately naming racial barriers, and directly addressing them, is the only way to end homelessness. As a result, in recent years, HUD began publishing homelessness data disaggregated by race. The numbers make clear that [certain groups](#) are more likely to be homeless than the overall population. Efforts to unpack these issues must continue.

### ***RECOMMENDATION:***

HUD should provide greater context for race and ethnicity data.

In recent years, HUD has taken great strides toward helping CoCs understand racial inequities in their communities. Within the AHAR, it publishes race-specific information related to population counts, sheltered status, and housing program usage. It has also produced a separate [race equity analysis tool](#).

The agency should continue this work. Alone or with partners, it can periodically (e.g., every 2 years) produce an ad hoc report solely focused on racial equity and homelessness. Such reporting could include items such as:

- Analysis at the intersections of identity (e.g., focused on Black women or Latino youth),
- Count and shelter usage trendlines over time,
- Regional- and geographic-based inquiries,
- References to other governmental (and non-governmental) resources highlighting community-specific histories of the influence of race on housing opportunities, and
- References to other governmental (and non-governmental) resources highlighting the current race-related housing situation in communities across America.

Similar to the older adults data discussion, such ad hoc reporting efforts would be greatly enriched by the availability of person-level data.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

Target technical assistance to communities experiencing unique racial equity challenges.

In recent years, HUD and the field have increasingly focused on racial disparities. However, they haven't defined the levels at which racial disparities should signal the need for heightened concern.

HUD should work with the field to identify benchmarks for elevated levels of disparities. Reaching those benchmarks should trigger the availability of HUD-provided technical assistance.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

Incorporate targeted universalism principles into system planning.

HUD introduced Stella M, software designed to help communities with system planning, in 2022. Beyond Stella M, individual communities have implemented other methods of system planning.

Over time, Stella M and other system planning approaches should incorporate targeted universalism principles into their frameworks. Targeted universalism encourages the creation of a universal goal (reaching all groups) and then requires stakeholders to address the unique needs of each subgroup in reaching that goal. It is an approach that ensures that no one group is left behind in efforts to end homelessness.



## ADDITIONAL IDEAS

During the Alliance’s conversations about potential data use and reporting reforms, additional ideas arose that did not fall into the above categories. They are grouped together and discussed below.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

The homelessness field should supplement quantitative data by developing protocols for surveying and interviewing people with lived experience.

Quantitative data is enlightening. However, qualitative approaches often reveal useful information that can’t be gained through reviewing numbers on a spreadsheet. By asking thoughtful questions and listening, homeless services systems can gain a richer understanding of an individual’s circumstances, challenges, strengths, and ideas for bettering services and their own circumstances.

CoCs such as King County in Washington have been exploring ways to interview and survey people experiencing homelessness with the goal of using the information to provide better services.

Governmental and/or non-governmental agencies should help pool and share information about survey and interview efforts. Agencies should evaluate how these tools can impact individual and system outcomes. And, based on such legwork, protocols (or best practices) should be developed for surveying or interviewing people with lived experience.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

The AHAR should directly highlight system capacity to serve people experiencing homelessness.

Through its [State of Homelessness](#) report, the Alliance calculates each community’s ability to serve people in need. Using the Housing Inventory Count and Point-in-Time Count data included in AHAR Part 1, the number of people who are experiencing homelessness (sheltered and unsheltered) is compared to the number of shelter beds available in the community. Thus, the report can make statements such as, “Community Y is only able to provide a shelter bed to 50 percent of individuals experiencing homelessness.”

HUD should perform such calculations or identify other ways to illustrate system capacity. Such data, on its own, does not suggest systems are doing a bad job or reach deeper questions (for example, the quality of shelter offerings). But it does let Congress and other policymakers know the degree to which existing resources fall short in ensuring that everyone has access to a place to sleep at night. It is easier to get policymakers to fill a gap when it is clear how big the gap is.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

The homelessness field should experiment with new forms of data collection that reflect the severity of people's needs.

Currently, the homelessness field uses the category of “chronic homelessness” as one way of estimating the number of people who have high-level needs. Members of this group have a disability and have experienced homelessness for multiple and/or extended periods of time.

The “**chronic homeless**” category fails to fully capture the type and depth of needs of the homeless population. Consider the example of hypothetical Person A—he has a disability that interferes with every aspect of daily living, including his ability to work. Person B has a disability that doesn't impact her ability to hold a full-time job. The “chronic homeless” category does not distinguish between Person A and Person B. Further, the category does not allow for estimates of resource needs—e.g., a system that has 100 people who require full-time nursing care.

Some stakeholders believe there should be a more sophisticated method of categorizing and then counting the number of people with the highest-level needs.

Government and non-government leaders should foster conversations focused on identifying new approaches or existing community-based approaches currently not used in national-level reporting. Promising ideas should be tested and evaluated.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

The federal government should take steps to support communities in sharing information across data systems.

There are multiple HMIS vendors. Their different versions of HMIS sometimes require human resources and financial investments to ensure that they are effectively able to speak to one another, creating barriers to sharing data across CoCs. This hinders statewide and regional data sharing and collaboration.

Additionally, homeless services systems could realize important goals by integrating their data with other systems such as healthcare, SNAP, and TANF. Sharing information across systems can aid efforts to evaluate the needs of people experiencing homelessness. It could facilitate access to services from other systems. And it could enhance the information used to inform policy. However, data integration requires time and resources.

Congress and federal administrative agencies should assume a greater leadership role in facilitating information sharing across data systems. Federal actors can contribute new resources, technical assistance, relevant rulemaking, and helpful federal-level cross-agency collaborations.

## RECOMMENDATION:

### Enhance the quality of data in HMIS databases.

Many communities continuously work to improve the quality of the data in their HMIS systems.

Such activities include ensuring that more unsheltered people are included in databases by incorporating (or better incorporating) information gathered by street outreach programs. Other possible improvements include expanding the number programs participating in data reporting, expanding the number of users who can directly add data to HMIS, and training frontline staff to correctly and reliably record information.

CoCs stand to benefit from continued technical assistance from HUD (and other agencies) as well as support in identifying funding sources for this work.



# FUNDING

Some recommendations in this report may result in added costs for communities that have another looming priority placing demands on their resources—housing people experiencing homelessness. Moreover, existing data efforts are often considered to be underfunded. For example: 1) the Point-in-Time Count does not have dedicated funding and significantly relies on volunteers, and 2) localities may not have sufficient staffing for minimally required data work.

These circumstances suggest that it is unlikely that the federal government and communities could immediately adopt all this report’s recommendations (plus other good ideas for reform). Instead, priorities must be established, determining which types of reforms would be most useful to efforts to end homelessness. Those determinations may vary over time and by community.

One thing is also clear: new fiscal resources would help in realizing desired data reforms.

## ***RECOMMENDATION:***

Target new resources towards data reform.

Congress could act to ensure that new dollars are dedicated to homeless services data reforms and improvements.

State and local governments and private foundations should also expand their contributions to such endeavors. And, finally, advocates and other stakeholders should help in identifying and creating new funding sources.

## ***RECOMMENDATION:***

Effectively leverage existing resources to help expand capacity.

HUD-provided technical assistance could guide efforts to effectively leverage known and existing federal resources (for example, pooling resources across jurisdictions). It could also provide advice related to securing state/local government and private funds.



# CONCLUSION

The Alliance’s conversations with the field revealed potential data reforms that could help meet the goal of ensuring that everyone in America has a permanent place to call home. Having a better understanding of subgroup variations, services participation patterns, and outcomes can help in identifying areas in need of improvement. Various constraints hinder reform efforts—significant among them are a lack of financial and human resources necessary to implement change. These factors should not be underestimated. However, the government should take steps to increase funding, data quality, and the use of data to maximize the positive impact of investments in housing and homelessness assistance programs.

