

# The Importance of Quality Data

Substantive policy and programmatic improvements related to homelessness require access to quality data. Without an accurate understanding of the causes of homelessness, as well as the effectiveness of specific strategies, it is impossible to identify and implement potential improvements. Quality data related to homelessness, however, can be difficult to gather. Rather than existing as a static, unchanging population, populations experiencing homelessness are better thought of as a “moving target” when it comes to data collection (Lee et al, 2021). Consequently, a single methodology or data source is not sufficient for accurate estimation; a ‘family of studies’ approach, consisting of triangulating multiple sources and methods is more appropriate (Brignone et al, 2018).

## Data Sources on Homeless Veterans

The most complete report on Veteran homelessness comes from the Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR), which has been published by HUD annually since 2007. AHAR consists of multiple parts and reports both point-in-time prevalence, which measure the population experiencing homelessness on a given night, and period prevalence, which covers a broader time frame. AHAR data is drawn from Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS), which aggregate data from homeless service providers in communities around the country. In addition, the VA has a notoriously comprehensive data management system, including an entire database dedicated to homelessness programs, Homeless Operations Management and Evaluation System (HOMES).

Both HOMES and HMIS represent important advances in data collection and homeless prevention. According to Dr. Claudia Solari, Senior Research Associate at the Urban Institute, “At first, most people didn’t even think you would be able to get data on such a mobile and diverse group of people who have various reasons that they may not want to be found or identified. The Homeless Management Information Systems proved them wrong...The critical role that data has played in shaping our homelessness response system cannot be overstated” (C. Solari, personal communication, 11/14/2021).

## Coordination and Alignment

This multifaceted nature of housing insecurity and diverse needs of individuals experiencing homelessness has generated an equally complex organizational ecosystem; individuals interact with many organizations over the same period, many of which have their own personalized data systems. As a result, comparison across data sets is not a simple task. HMIS systems, for example, are organized around Continuums of Care, jurisdictions that can include single major metropolitan areas, vast swaths of rural areas, and many various geographic areas in between. HOMES data, on the other hand, are largely defined by the geographic reach of VA medical centers, resulting in different boundary lines being drawn.

This lack of common geography can result in translational difficulties. In the words of Dr. Solari, “You have two very large systems – The VA and the mainstream homelessness response system – that are trying to serve the same population in a given community with jurisdictions that don’t quite overlap; they are siloed enough that you don’t quite know what the left and right hand are doing,” (C. Solari, personal communication, 11/14/2021). While stakeholders have gone to great lengths to improve the quality of their data systems, aligning VA data with non-profit partners’ data is a work in progress. Recent progress has been made in aligning HMIS and HOMES systems, but more work needs to be done. Additionally, both HMIS and HOMES rely on program-specific data, but many homeless veterans don’t use VA homeless programs or other programs that would get them counted in these databases. For example, according to the National Health and Resilience in Veterans Survey, less than 20% of veterans who experienced homelessness at some point reported using VA Homeless programs (Brignone et al, 2018).

## Qualitative Tools

Dr. Solari notes that an often-underutilized source of data is the perspectives of the homeless individuals themselves. “It is important to hear directly from people who are experiencing homelessness themselves. They know what is interfering with their ability to get out of homelessness and where they came from before that first night they found themselves without a space of their own; if you ask enough people, you will begin to see patterns emerge and be able to break down structural barriers,” (C. Solari, personal communication, 11/14/2021). In other words, when it comes to identifying the specific drivers of homelessness, the potential prevention points that could have been leveraged, or the programmatic components that did or didn’t work, there is no replacement for first-hand experience. By investing in data-collection efforts that go beyond binary outcome variables to gather in-depth knowledge of participants’ backgrounds and perspectives, researchers and practitioners can dramatically improve the quality of their data and thus the effectiveness of these programs. For example, in her research on veteran inflow, Dr. Solari and her colleagues heard from several communities that had used qualitative data to identify homelessness inflow points, such as substance use treatment programs, that wouldn’t have shown up in their quantitative data collection efforts (C. Solari, personal communication, 11/14/2021).