

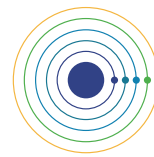


# How intersectional approaches to data can be used to drive whole systems change

Recommendations from the Institute of Global Homelessness' Vanguard Cities program



George and Tanya Ruff  
Institute of Global  
Homelessness



**INCLUSIVE**  
DATA CHARTER

The Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH) is a Champion of the Inclusive Data Charter (IDC), a global multi-stakeholder network launched in 2018. The IDC works to advance the availability and use of inclusive and disaggregated data so that governments and organizations better understand, address, and monitor the needs of marginalized people and ensure no one is left behind.

Intersectional inequality ([see the Primer at bit.ly/IDC-primer](https://bit.ly/IDC-primer)) stems from multiple sources of systemic failure. There are likewise systemic reasons why individuals face increased risk of harm, violence, or discrimination due to intersectional identity (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). Homelessness is a complex issue at the intersection

of public health, housing affordability, domestic violence, mental illness, substance misuse, urbanization, racial and gender discrimination, infrastructure, and unemployment. This complexity indicates a need for a mix of policy, institutions, actors, collaborations, programs, and interventions to work in tandem to address problems at a

systems level.

This case study shows that intersectional approaches to data can contribute to whole systems change. Moreover, there needs to be strong coherence between data systems and inclusive principles and practices to tackle intersecting inequality. Careless data practice, increased surveillance, and lack of informed consent can worsen intersectional inequality (Petty, et al., 2018; Shafique, et al. 2019). An intersectional approach promotes equity across the data value chain by examining the dynamics between data systems, practices,

and the impacts on individuals at greatest risk of marginalization or discrimination.

This case study focuses on the Institute of Global Homelessness' Vanguard Cities program to demonstrate what is involved in driving whole systems change to end homelessness. It shows how intersectionality informs their recommendations to municipalities on the collection, storing, and use of data to support people who are experiencing homelessness.



## Key messages

- Individuals at greatest risk of marginalization or discrimination are often invisible in data that governments and organizations collect. Definitions of homelessness vary greatly by country, and homelessness data is incomplete. Without a comparable definition of homelessness, it is extremely difficult to know how many people experience homelessness worldwide.
- Resolving intersectional inequality often involves different organizations and support services to work together. Data systems must be designed to enable multiple actors working alongside each other either in complementary or joined up ways to address the issues homeless people face.
- Alongside rigorous and community-wide enumeration, standardized assessments should be used to understand the person/family's' needs (e.g., health and housing). This information should be used to refer them for specific support services and match them to housing interventions.
- People with lived experience are experts. Their testimonies of discrimination should be heard. Programs should be designed to take into account the feedback of people of lived experience and should work to hire and share the decision-making with people of lived experience - this includes work to collect, analyze, and use data.

## The Intersectional Approaches to Inclusive and Disaggregated Data series

Different aspects of a person's identity—such as their ethnicities, gender, religion, disability, or sexual orientation—can influence the amount or type of discrimination or exclusion a person faces. 'Intersecting inequality' refers to when aspects of a person's identity overlap and worsen the discrimination or exclusion they experience. People who face intersecting inequalities are the most likely to be left behind by development.

The Inclusive Data Charter is a global multi-stakeholder network that advances the availability and use of inclusive and disaggregated data so that governments and organizations better understand, address, and monitor the needs of marginalized people and ensure no one is left behind. The Intersectional Approaches to Inclusive and Disaggregated Data Series contributes resources and practical insights to help practitioners in their work to resolve intersecting inequalities.

### The context of IGH's work

Homelessness is a result of endemic systems failure. It happens when individuals and/or families are unable to obtain or keep the housing and care they need due to this systems failure. Homelessness can affect anyone, but specific individuals are at greater risk. Intersectionality can help to explain who is at greatest risk of homelessness. Globally, homelessness arises along the intersections of poverty, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, disability, and age.

People may become homeless because they lose access to stable income or wages, need to escape domestic violence, face a health crisis, or suffer prejudice or discrimination. Sometimes, entire communities can be displaced as a result of conflict, violence, or climate change. Intersecting inequalities may also prolong homelessness as systems may fail to enable individuals to access housing programs or stay in housing.

The Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH), founded in 2014 as a joint initiative of DePaul University and Depaul International, is the

first organization to focus on homelessness as a global phenomenon. IGH staff and its Advisory Committee work with a broad network of world-class advisors, experts, and organizations, to provide direct services for people experiencing homelessness, work with communities and advocate to end homelessness.

IGH, through its 'A Place to Call Home Initiative,' partners with 13 Vanguard Cities who are working to end homelessness in their communities. Vanguard Cities have set individual goals reflective of their local context and have defined homelessness using the IGH Global Framework for Understanding Homelessness. In this work, IGH supports cities to better track and measure the scale of homelessness along with developing a systems approach to ending homelessness and exchanging knowledge between cities. Their advice stems from in-depth research, best practices, and site visits, during which IGH staff and experts on homelessness listen to the concerns of each city before making recommendations.

At the heart of this work is acknowledging how intersectional inequalities impact homelessness differently across cities, with safety and security of homeless people their primary concern. This case study discusses some of their top tips that they often recommend to inform an intersectional approach.

## Why comparable definitions of homelessness are necessary

Intersectional approaches emphasize accepting lived experience of individuals as evidence of marginalization or discrimination and taking steps to understand intersecting inequality in relation to their experience ([see the Primer at bit.ly/IDC-primer](https://bit.ly/IDC-primer)). But we must not forget that data systems must be designed inclusively, to ensure that these individuals and communities do not remain undocumented or invisible to policymakers and practitioners. Establishing clear definitions is also key to understanding and measuring homelessness, and consistent and comparable definitions between countries will lead to a better understanding of the scale of homelessness globally.

For many countries throughout the world, homeless data is based on rough estimates, outdated census data, or rudimentary counts from major cities. The majority of countries do not count or define homelessness in a similar or consistent way. Definitions of homelessness vary widely, with some countries defining homelessness as those living on the street or rough sleepers, while other countries also include people in temporary homeless accommodation. Some have a broader definition of homelessness that encompasses the previous categories as well as people doubling up, living in insecure accommodation or in housing unfit for human habitation. The difference in definition and varying methods of data collection makes aggregation of the total number of people experiencing homelessness and any cross-

country comparison extremely difficult.

To confront this challenge, IGH developed a Global Framework for Understanding Homelessness that can be flexibly adapted to local contexts. The Framework contributes a shared vocabulary to support international collaboration and to enable ‘apples to apples’ comparisons. It was featured as part of an Experts Group Convening that helped inform the United Nations first resolution on homelessness in 2020 (UN, 2020).

The Framework provides definitions of homelessness according to three categories: people without accommodation; people living in temporary or crisis accommodation; and people living in severely inadequate and insecure accommodation. Each category contains several descriptors to increase rigour and standardization of definitions.

People without accommodation	People living in temporary or crisis accommodation	People living in severely inadequate and insecure accommodation
<p><b>1A</b> People sleeping in the streets or in other open spaces (such as parks, railway embankments, under bridges, on pavement, on river banks, in forests etc.)</p> <p><b>1B</b> People sleeping in public roofed spaces or buildings not intended for human habitation (such as bus and railway stations, taxi ranks, derelict buildings, public buildings, etc.)</p> <p><b>1C</b> People sleeping in their cars, rickshaws, open fishing boats and other forms of transport</p> <p><b>1D</b> ‘Pavement dwellers’ - individuals or households who live on the street in a regular spot, usually with some form of makeshift cover</p>	<p><b>2A</b> People staying in night shelters (where occupants have to renegotiate their accommodation nightly)</p> <p><b>2B</b> People living in homeless hostels and other types of temporary accommodation for homeless people (where occupants have a designated bed or room)</p> <p><b>2C</b> Women and children living in refuges for those fleeing domestic violence</p> <p><b>2D</b> People living in camps provided for ‘internally displaced people’ i.e. those who have fled their homes as a result of armed conflict, natural or human-made disasters, human rights violations, development projects, etc. but have not crossed international borders</p> <p><b>2E</b> People living in camps or reception centres/temporary accommodation for asylum seekers, refugees and other immigrants</p>	<p><b>3A</b> People sharing with friends and relatives on a temporary basis</p> <p><b>3B</b> People living under threat of violence</p> <p><b>3C</b> People living in cheap hotels, bed and breakfasts and similar</p> <p><b>3D</b> People squatting in conventional housing</p> <p><b>3E</b> People living in conventional housing that is unfit for human habitation</p> <p><b>3F</b> People living in tailers, caravans and tents</p> <p><b>3G</b> People living in extremely overcrowded conditions</p> <p><b>3H</b> People living in non-conventional buildings and temporary structures, including those living in slums/informal settlements</p>

Without standardized definitions, current measures of homelessness are incomplete, and policymakers lack adequate and timely information about the scale of the problem. Countries lack consistent benchmarks to drive their policy agendas. Currently, the best statistic we have on homelessness at a global scale is a 2001 estimate from the United Nations Settlements program, showing that 1.1 billion people live in inadequate

accommodation, and more than 100 million people have no housing at all. Up-to-date data is urgently needed.

The most important aspect of the Framework, though, is that it can still be responsive to diverse contexts. Cities and countries can choose categories of homelessness that are most relevant to their situation, and this is crucial to account for intersectional experiences of homelessness.

## Designing data collection, analysis, and use to respond to needs

IGH recommends conducting regular enumeration that covers the entire community with a robust methodology that leads to high accuracy and validity. When communities enumerate on a regular basis with consistent methodology, the data produced can be used to track changes over time and monitor progress. As part of regular enumeration, IGH recommends that communities use standardized assessments that capture relevant demographic information (such as age, employment status, time spent homeless, etc.) as well as a series of questions to understand the person/family's needs (e.g. health and housing). Each community often uses different assessment tools as highlighted by this example table of homelessness specific tools. Communities then use this information to refer them for specific services and match them to specific housing interventions reflective of their needs. An important component of standardized assessments are privacy, consent, and data-sharing agreements that detail how a person's data will be stored and shared, and also allow an individual to consent to and decide who can access their data. A person's data is shared in order to coordinate services and housing placement, and then all clients' data are used anonymously to understand trends and target future improvements to programs. The analysis of trends and programs helps the community understand their progress in reducing homelessness, break down who and why people are experiencing homelessness, and make programs more effective for different subgroups.

IGH also recommends that communities create a coordinated housing and services process using administrative data, which includes prioritization for different types of housing based on a person's needs and vulnerabilities. This has enabled municipalities to prioritize individuals in greatest need for housing or other services.

Intersectional approaches to data drive whole systems change by considering the context first and foremost. Data needs to give practitioners actionable information, along with a way to monitor homelessness appropriately. Strategies that use data to address needs and communicate to people experiencing homelessness about what their data is used for are preferable.

## Managing data across stakeholders

Resolving homelessness, especially when considering intersectional experiences, requires different organizations and support services to work together. Data systems must be designed in a way that enables multiple actors to collaborate with each other either in complementary or joined-up ways to address intersectional issues homeless people face.

For example, a homeless person living with a mental illness would require housing along with support from social workers and healthcare services. It is often impossible to ensure that this person has adequate housing without providing healthcare simultaneously, and there can be many obstacles to obtaining healthcare without identification and so on. No one entity helps a person facing these circumstances. Rather, they must all work together to ensure that an individual gets the help that they need.

Creating a supporting structure to manage data effectively is needed. A collective impact group is one way that data can be managed effectively across stakeholders. Collective impact groups bring together organizations and institutions across sectors with members of a collective impact group making a pledge to work together towards a specific goal to reduce or end homelessness. A collective

impact group can involve (sometimes hundreds) of civil society organizations, government (at federal, regional and/or municipal levels), academic institutions, or not-for-profit organizations. A collective impact group will often have a steering committee or an organization that oversees their daily operations managing their data systems.

For intersectional approaches to data, collective impact groups should consider how to use disaggregated data to identify particular communities and how they are discriminated against in accessing or receiving services. The purpose is to leverage the information to create programs directed at these groups of people and to adapt current programs so that they have greater equity and impact for everyone involved in the program.



## Including people who have experienced homelessness in evaluation and governance activities

Lastly, a key way to identify risks and vulnerability in data practice is to allow people who have experienced homelessness to participate in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of homeless services. This should generally be people who have already come through homelessness, are stably housed, and have integrated the trauma. People who have lived experience of homelessness are able to provide meaningful input and pick up on intersectional issues effectively. Programs and systems are more effective and equitable when people of lived experience have an equal share in the design and decision-making process.

There are many opportunities to involve people who have experienced homelessness across different layers of intersectional data practice, such as:

- **Participating in qualitative focus groups or interviews;**
- **Working as an enumerator for a homelessness survey;**
- **Conducting evaluations of homelessness services;**
- **Working as a project or program employee;**
- **Serving as a member of a steering committee or board member.**

The benefits of involving people who have experienced homelessness is that organizations are able to obtain more honest answers and more meaningful input on their programs and practice. When people of lived experience are hired as evaluators, they are able to engage and gather feedback that is more reflective of the actual situation and have more open dialogues on how things can be improved. This involvement creates stronger feedback loops that provide stronger insights into programs or practice.

To include homeless people in paid employment requires re-examining institutional practice in terms of the job descriptions, developing training or internship programmes, and thinking through what barriers homeless people would confront when applying for a job.

For positions on steering committees or boards, consider having a rotating schedule to share such opportunities equitably and ensure that you are providing adequate remuneration for their time. Statements on how remuneration is determined are essential. More importantly, having a seat at the table does not necessarily mean that meetings are the right place to collect sensitive feedback, and having additional ways to prompt discussion and gather feedback outside of steering committee meetings is also necessary. Programs should be designed to take into account the feedback of people of lived experience and programs should aim to hire and share the decision-making with people of lived experience.





## Key recommendations

In an intersectional approach to data there is a change away from disjointed data collection, analysis, and use, as well as siloed intervention towards a more integrated approach to data systems and practice that promotes equity across the data value chain. To implement an intersectional approach to drive whole systems change, IGH recommends:

- **Making sure the data you collect is the data needed to drive change:** Define homelessness and use enumeration strategies that match a community's context. By joining up data systems to focus on targeted outcomes, stakeholders can ensure that the data that is collected serves a purpose and is central to their practice. Collective impact groups, regular enumeration, and using the data to inform decision-making are examples of this.
- **Being clear about what data is used for:** Everyone who is evaluated using a standardized assessment will have signed a form granting permission to share their information with specific rules on which partners have access to this information. Data is created with the objective of facilitating coordinated processes to access long-term and affordable housing with supportive services, to adapt to future housing and program needs, and to work towards more effective and equitable systems. Communicating what data is used for and using agreements to map out the sharing of data maintains and respects the privacy of an individual and ensures that personally identifiable data is not collected without a clear and direct benefit for them.
- **Whole systems change also requires targeted intervention:** A commitment to justice is needed to resolve homelessness. This will often mean that biases in data systems and practice need to be investigated and addressed. Including individuals and communities at greatest risk of marginalization or discrimination in setting data standards, collecting data, and evaluation activities as employees or as members of steering committees is vital to better understand what targeted intervention is needed within intersectional approaches to data. Members of the community will often see and understand risks involved that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.



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