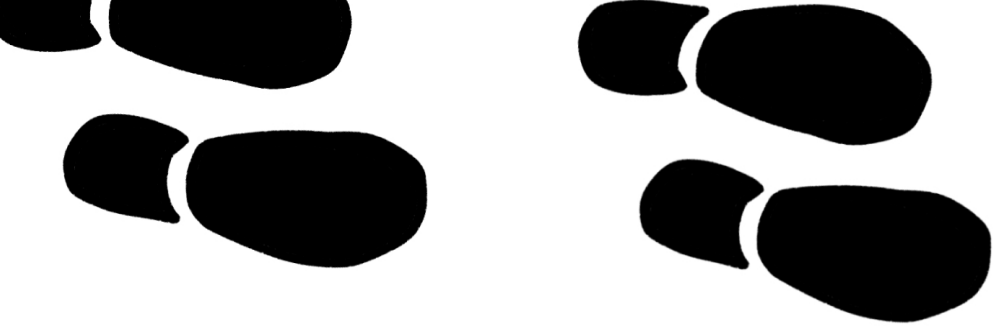# DATA JUSTICE

WHAT?

WHY?

WHERE?

HELLO OUT THERE!

Before we dive into this zine series and the nitty gritty of data justice and how we are working with that concept in the field of youth homelessness, we want to take a beat and introduce ourselves.

This project was conceived by Dr. Naomi Nichols in 2020 shortly after she moved to Peterborough to work in the Sociology department at Trent University. Back when she was working at McGill, she had been interested in how the data that gets collected from and about youth affect their life trajectories, starting right from birth, through day care and school systems, and into wider social service delivery systems like child welfare and the homeless-serving system.
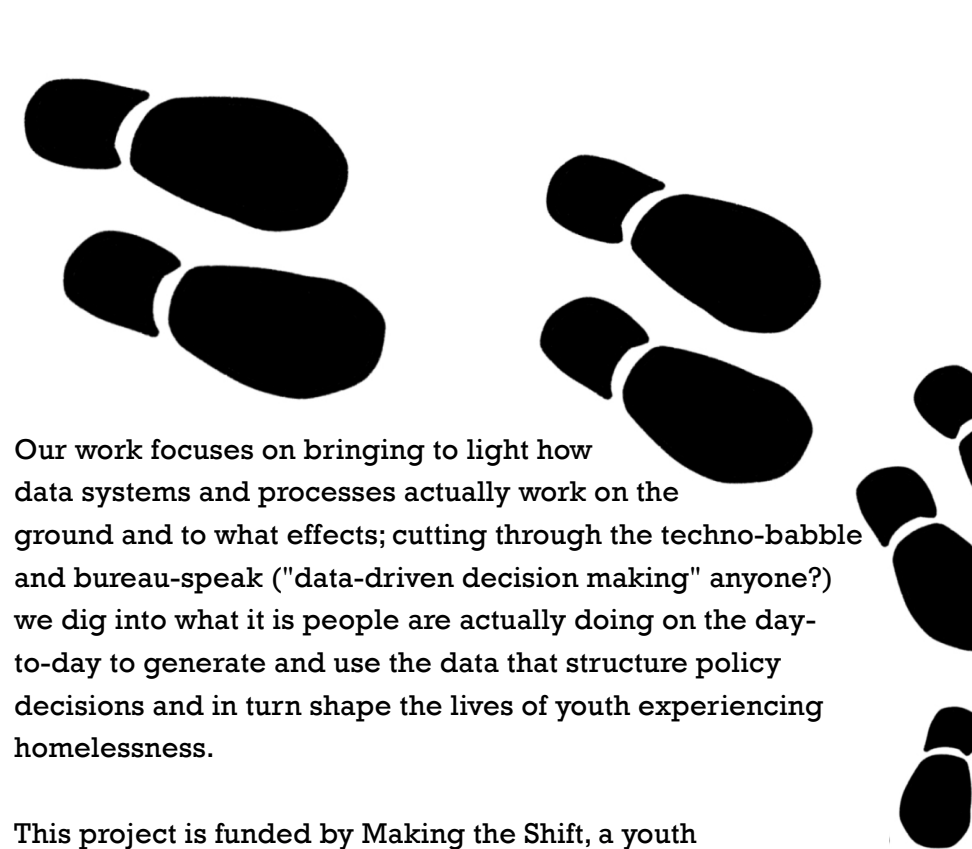
From this first curiosity grew a few different, but related, projects: one focusing on the data systems and processes at work in the child welfare system, another on the youth homelessness system, and even more projects focused on the local operations of these systems and particular institutional sites where they intersect – places like residential care facilities.

Along the way she built out a team to help her with the work. The project we describe in this zine series is focused on the youth homelessness system in Ontario, and tracing how it relates to other social services. It's been up and running since the summer of 2021 and has had several people join and contribute along the way.

Three Trent doctoral students formed the core team for the first year of the project – David Knezevic, Faith Mottahedi, and Sarah Cullingham. In 2022 LeShar Shaw, another Trent PhD student, and Aron Rosenberg, a postdoc from McGill, joined the crew. And like all the projects at the Research for Social Change Lab, where our work is based, we get some admin and logistical help from Will Pearson, our handsome and clever office manager.

Though our backgrounds and interests are varied (some of us spend altogether too much time on TikTok, another spent a whole year offline at the beginning of the pandemic) we all share a commitment to supporting young people to thrive, and to building the systems and the structures that can help them do just that. David, Faith, and LeShar all came to this work with a background in front line service delivery, while Sarah came from the world of policy and municipal planning (a self-described recovering bureaucrat) and Aron brings a background in technology studies and education.

Our work focuses on bringing to light how data systems and processes actually work on the ground and to what effects; cutting through the techno-babble and bureau-speak ("data-driven decision making" anyone?) we dig into what it is people are actually doing on the day-to-day to generate and use the data that structure policy decisions and in turn shape the lives of youth experiencing homelessness.

This project is funded by Making the Shift, a youth homelessness social innovation lab, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, one of the three main federal research funding bodies in Canada.

ARE WE DATA RICH BUT INFORMATION POOR?

This is the question that was on our minds back in 2020 when we set out to undertake what we call a 'cross-sectoral data and infrastructure audit.' Three years later, we are still winding our way through the labyrinth of databases, dashboards, lists, inventories, and indexes that structure and sustain our modern social service delivery systems.

For now, we have focused our attention on the child welfare and homeless-serving systems in Ontario, Canada where our lab is based. Both systems have been subject to recent modernization projects which have aimed to enable data-driven decision making through the use of new tools and technologies. These are systems that intersect in, and impact, the lives and wellbeing of youth.

The aim of our research process is to understand how these data systems and technologies structure and frame the work of service delivery. With this understanding we hope to effect changes that improve the experiences of those who interact with these systems, making the work of accessing support easier and making those supports work better for the people who use them. Along the way, we have come to understand that improving client experiences means improving the transparency and functionality of these data systems for frontline workers.

We situate this work under the umbrella of data justice. And this zine, the first in a series of zines about what we have learned through our research in Ontario's youth homelessness system, sets out what this term means to us and how we are using it to think about, and engage with data and data processes. We also provide some context for understanding the youth homelessness system, the primary field site we are reporting on in this zine.

We should use data justice as a form of critique, a framework for shifting the entry-point and debate on data-related developments in a way that foregrounds social justice concerns and ongoing historical struggles against inequality, oppression and domination...

The question remains whether data infrastructures can ever be extracted and redirected from the current conditions of injustice.

(Dencik, Hintz, Redden, Treré; 2019)
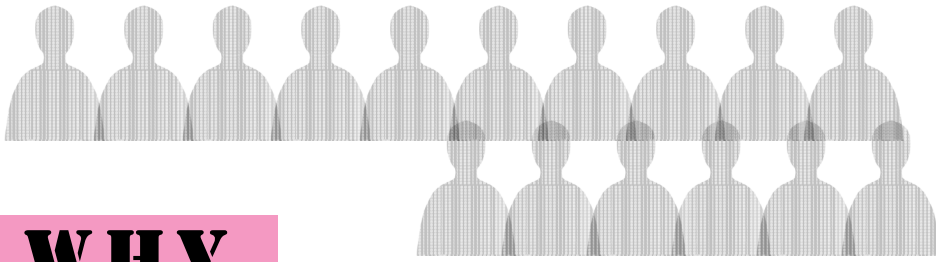
WHY DATA JUSTICE?

It seems these days that data is everywhere. But where does it come from? Who has access to it? And what (or whose) aims does it serve? From our online engagements to our travel habits and shopping patterns, more and more of our everyday activities are being turned into data. So much so that the term '**datafication**' has been coined to describe just that:

"a growing trend of turning human behaviour and social activities into data points that can be collected and analysed"

(Dencik, Hintz, Redden, Treré; 2019).

In the UK, sociologist Evelyn Ruppert has investigated the productive power of specific data practices, examining how they 'make up' populations to be governed (Ruppert and Scheel, 2021) and are increasingly focused on transactional relations between people and the state (Ruppert, 2012). No longer are governments just interested in relatively fixed demographic categories; these days more attention is being paid to patterns of service use and forms of governmental engagement (e.g., what benefits someone is receiving, which service centres they access).
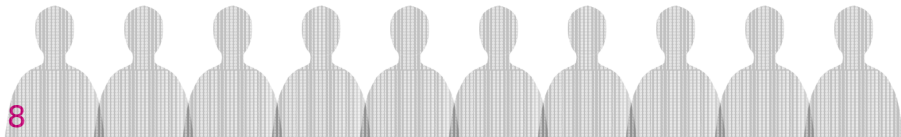
In our work on the homelessness system, we see both an increase in the collection of service utilization metrics like those identified by Ruppert, and in the use of data to coordinate and prioritize the delivery of housing services and supports.

For example, the federal Reaching Home strategy, which supplies some funding to help municipalities address homelessness, mandates that funded communities use a digital database known as a Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) to track client information and service use patterns. That same strategy requires those receiving funding to implement Coordinated Access processes which sort service users onto inter-related lists according to standardized assessments of vulnerability and housing need. In Ontario, the provincial government now requires all municipalities to keep a real time list of all people experiencing homelessness, known as a By-Name List (BNL).

We'll get into the details of how all these things fit together and work (or don't) in later zines in this series. For now, let's just say that in Ontario we are generating more and more data about people living without housing, including their service use patterns, interactions with service providers, and risk and vulnerability profiles. If you are a person living without housing in Ontario today, the expectation is that your client profile will be captured in a local database that will be used to populate a list of people experiencing homelessness. The promise is that this information capture will be an avenue to receiving housing supports, but in the context of scarce resources, this promise is not often realized in a timely manner.

At the same time, the right to housing is now enshrined in Canadian law under the National Housing Strategies Act (2019). This same piece of legislation established the role of Federal Housing Advocate to support the progressive realization of the right to housing in Canada. The first annual report from the office of the Federal Housing Advocate (2022-2023) highlights the need for better data to monitor the right to housing. Things like tracking evictions and the availability of housing supports and assistance were identified as particular gaps (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2023).

And so we have a situation in which we are compiling *lots of data about homeless people* on the one hand, and *little data about the housing system* on the other. Using the concept of data justice to unpack these changes we can identify two important starting points for our research:

1. **The process of datafication is not politically neutral; rather, the mechanisms through which human activities are turned into data points, which are in turn analyzed to make decisions, are "bound up with certain social structures, interests, and ideas" (Dencik, Hintz, Redden, Treré, p. 2). The frame of data justice allows us to tease out these structures, interests, and ideas rather than taking them for granted.**

2. **Processes of datafication intersect with social justice efforts; it's important to understand not just how these processes unfold, but how they in turn structure our material realities in uneven ways. By anchoring our exploration in the concept of data justice, we attune to issues of equity, and an analysis of resource distribution and access in our thinking about data and how it is created, manipulated, and used in the provision of social services.**

SITUATING THE YOUTH HOMELESSNESS SYSTEM

What is the youth homelessness system, exactly? Where might you find it? Well, to be honest, it's a little complicated. It's hard to define where the contours of the youth homelessness system begin and end. Maybe that's because the issue of homelessness itself is what is known as a '**wicked problem**':

"a complex social issue that does not have a clear or singular line of cause and effect"

(Bonakdar, 2022).

The only concrete cause of homelessness is not having housing, but why and when that happens for people, especially young people, is highly variable.

On top of that, in Ontario, housing and homelessness services are the responsibility of municipal governments, so local systems of homeless response look a little different depending on where you are.
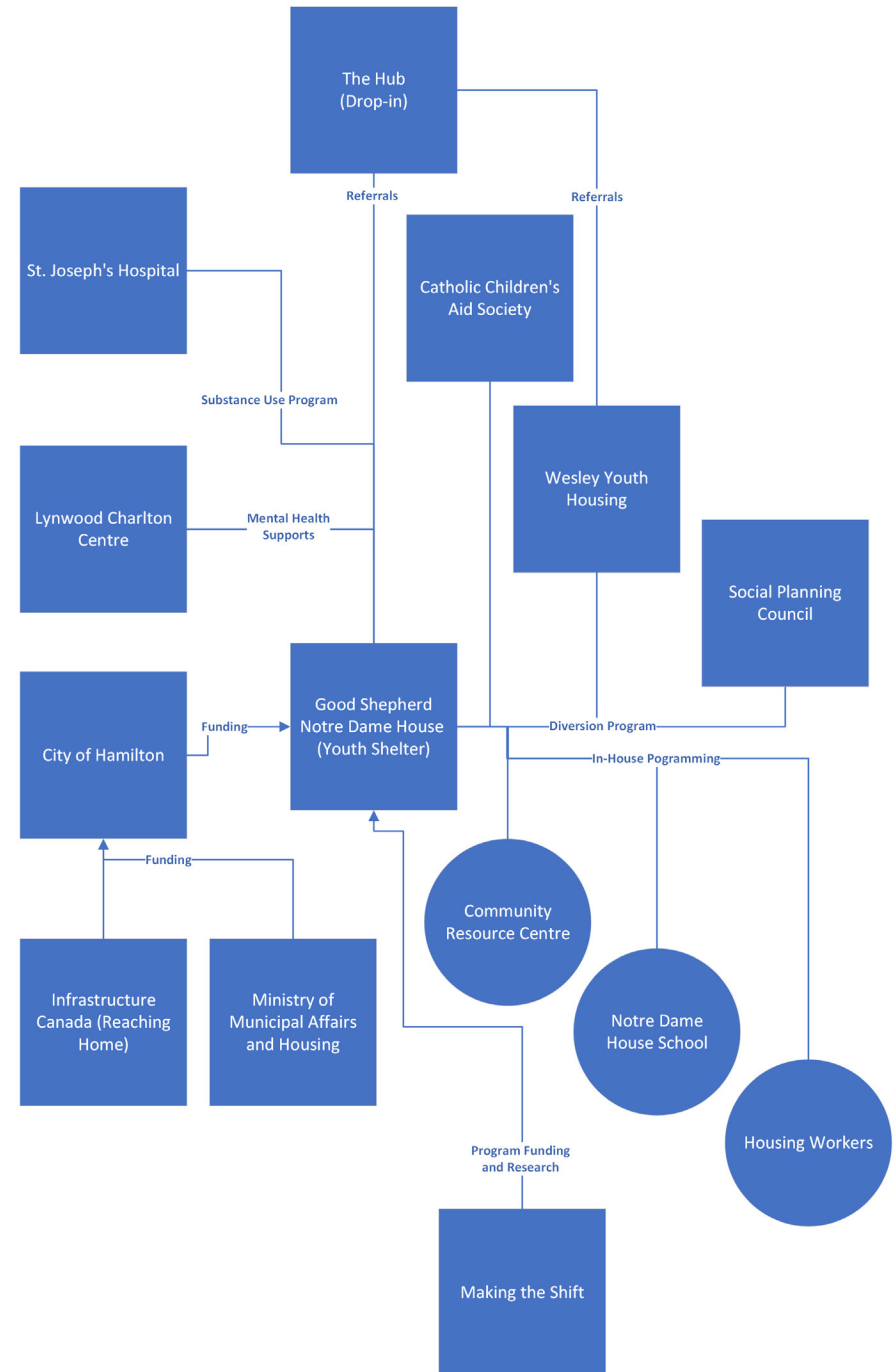
For this reason, we won't offer an abstract account of a theoretical youth homelessness system at the outset of this zine series; rather, we've chosen to map the contours of one specific municipal system to give a sense of how these systems look on the ground.

Over the course of this project we spoke to different people in Hamilton about their youth homelessness response and the data processes that are involved in it. Based on those conversations we developed this schematic of what the youth homelessness system looks like in that city.

As you can see, there are many different systems (e.g., education, health care, child welfare) that intersect with the youth homelessness system.

While some communities do have specific emergency shelters for young people, or specific protocols in place to support young people who are living without housing, others do not. And the databases, and even some of the data collection tools, that are used in the system are not specific to youth. As a result, throughout this zine series there may be times where we talk about the homeless-serving system as a whole, and other times where we look at services and processes for young people specifically.

The Hub (Drop-in)

St. Joseph's Hospital

Catholic Children's Aid Society

Referrals   Referrals

Substance Use Program

Wesley Youth Housing

Lynwood Charlton Centre   Mental Health Supports

Social Planning Council

Good Shepherd Notre Dame House (Youth Shelter)

City of Hamilton   Funding   Diversion Program

In-House Pogramming

Community Resource Centre

Funding

Infrastructure Canada (Reaching Home)   Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing

Notre Dame House School

Housing Workers

Program Funding and Research

Making the Shift

WHAT'S UP NEXT

We hope this was a helpful introduction to our work on data justice in the youth homelessness system in Ontario. The next zine in this series is called 'Data for Who? Data for What?' and it sets out what we know about the way data is generated in Ontario's youth homelessness system, how it circulates, and the kinds of decisions it informs.

READ ALONG WITH US

Bonakdar, A. (2022). Reflective Practice in Homelessness Research and Practice: Implications for Researchers and Practitioners in the Covid-19 Pandemic Era. International Journal on Homelessness, 1–13.

Canadian Human Rights Commission (2023). "Advocating for Change: The Housing Crisis in Canada; The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate's 2022–2023 Annual Report to the Minister". Available at: https://housing.chrcreport.ca/pdf/federal-housing-advocates-annual-report-2022-2023.pdf

Dencik, L., Hintz, A., Redden, J. & Treré, E. (2019). Exploring Data Justice: Conceptions, Applications and Directions, Information, Communication & Society, 22:7, 873-881, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2019.1606268

Dencik, L., Hintz, A., Redden, J., & Treré, E. (2022). Data justice. London, England: SAGE Publications.

Ruppert, E. (2012). The Governmental Topologies of Database Devices. Theory, culture & society, 29(4-5), 116–136. London, England: SAGE Publications.

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