



**DATA FOR
WHO?**

**DATA FOR
WHAT?**

**Structuring Service Delivery in
Ontario's Youth-Serving Systems**

DATA JUSTICE FOR YOUTH
ZINE 2



SSHRC  CRSH
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
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MAKING THE SHIFT^{INC}
youth homelessness social innovation lab

GETTING SITUATED

In this zine – the second in our series on data justice in Ontario's youth serving systems – we will look more specifically at data practices: what data is, how it's produced, what it's used for, and who it's used by in the coordination and management of services and supports for homeless or precariously housed youth.

As Evelyn Ruppert (a sociologist of data and governing) explains,

"Most government departments keep records, often in electronic format, that contain identification data about people and the services they have received. New information and communication technologies (ICTs) have advanced the digitization of these government records and the storing, maintenance, sharing and searching of large volumes of personal data." (2012, p. 116-7)

In both the homelessness and child welfare systems, we are interested in learning about what data (i.e., records about people and services) exists and how it's used. The homeless and youth-serving organizations we have been working with on this project are increasingly invested in the promise of new ICTs as tools that could reshape service delivery. In this zine we'll tease out the motivations behind this investment, how it's rolling out, and to what effects.

OUR APPROACH

In this series of projects we've spoken to over fifty workers in Ontario who are responsible for supporting youth in diverse ways throughout the province's youth, homelessness, and child welfare sectors – from frontline staff to supervisors, managers, coordinators, directors, and ministry employees. We focused our inquiry on how workers navigate digital infrastructures to collect, input, access, review, analyze, store, and otherwise use client data to support service delivery. In what follows, we offer an analysis of how data is produced and used to structure service delivery and decision-making processes in the youth-serving homelessness and child welfare systems.



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UNPACKING DATA PRACTICES

Let's get a couple things straight right out of the gate: the data practices we've been investigating are complex! Lots of different people are involved, often using tools and infrastructures that involve other people. And data practices are productive. As in, data doesn't simply exist in the world waiting to be identified and collated. It's actively and specifically produced – by people. What kinds of data get produced, who has access to it, and what it is used for are decisions made by people, and these decisions have real impacts in clients' lives.

Dorothy Smith (1990), who pioneered the sociology with which we approach our research, explains that data about a client contains more than just a representation of that client's reality – it also carries with it the ideologies of those who design and coordinate data practices. Others have put it this way:

“[D]ata, and the way it is generated, collected, analysed and used, is a product of an amalgamation of different actors, interests and social forces that shape how and on what terms society is increasingly being datafied.”
(Dencik, Hintz, Redden, & Treré, 2019, p. 873)

As we learned in one of our interviews, governments and service systems privilege certain kinds of data gathered by workers over clients' own accounts:

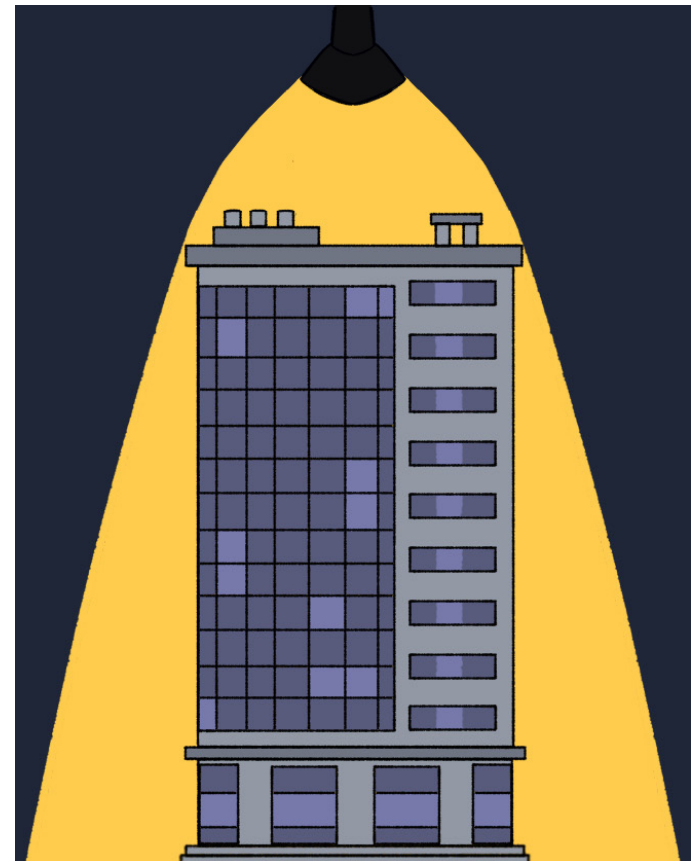
"In a liberal democratic society, numbers are credible and privileged, and lived experience is not...And so that's why it's so difficult when you talk about young people and children having a voice, homeless children having a voice... It's so difficult because they don't carry the weight of knowledge that's given credibility and importance."
(Senior Provincial Official)

But it's not enough to say that certain forms of knowing are privileged, or that data is produced in specific ways; the decisions about what gets counted and how are also impactful. Data practices are integral to the creation of a textual reality that allows people across institutions to coordinate their work. This textual reality standardizes service provision and allows frontline work to be managed at a distance. In sum, data practices produce the textual realities through which youth sector organizations operate and are governed. As Dorothy Smith put it:

"Textual realities are the ground of our contemporary consciousness of the world beyond the immediately known. As such they are integral to the coordination of activities among different levels of organization, within organizations, and in the society at large." (Smith, 1990, p.

83)

In our research, we have been analyzing how data practices construct specific textual realities which in turn structure and coordinate an ongoing service delivery experience for youth. We highlight the importance of understanding the processes by which data is gathered and utilized as a way to illuminate the governing ideologies that mediate people's data work. Like Smith, we are interested in tracing who has a say in the way data practices unfold and how this question – data *by who?* – is closely connected to another question: data *for who* or *for what?* As we analyze and explore data, we ask ourselves **"how they express the policies and ideologies of government"** (Smith, 1990, p. 88) and others who oversee youth data practices.





FOLLOWING THE

MONEY

In answering the question ‘data for who’ we think it’s important to follow the funding. So that’s where we begin...

In Ontario, municipal governments are responsible for the delivery of housing and homelessness services. In provincial government speak, municipal governments are known as “service managers” for housing and homelessness. Service managers are in turn responsible for allocating provincial and federal funding to support a range of initiatives, including emergency shelters, transitional housing units, supportive housing, and affordable rental units.

Some of the funding available to municipalities flows from federal-provincial cost share programs (e.g. the Canada Ontario Housing Benefit) and is structured through bilateral agreements between these two levels of government. The provincial government currently funds municipalities to deliver homelessness supports and services through the Homelessness Prevention Program. The federal government also provides funding directly to municipalities, Indigenous governments, and other community entities to address local homelessness needs through the national Reaching Home strategy.

The funding that municipal service managers and other community entities receive for housing and homelessness service delivery comes attached to specific program mandates and reporting requirements. This sets up a context in which municipal governments and the social service agencies they fund are required to collect, analyze, and report on specific data points and trends, and in some cases use specific standardized tools to do so.

In the child welfare sector, services are coordinated by Children's Aid Societies, NGOs funded by and reporting to the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

In both systems, funding and reporting requirements flow down and data and information flow up.

“So, under Reaching Home [federal funding], we’re a designated ‘community entity,’ and then for the province ‘a service system manager.’ So, it’s basically just the same thing, just different titles for each of them. And so that comes with accountabilities for how we manage the system...” (Municipal Homelessness Service Manager)



HOW DATA COMES TO BE

In order to answer the question of ‘data for what’ let’s look more closely at the infrastructures and tools that government-funded homelessness organizations must use to produce, store, and analyze data. These include the digital systems in which data is stored and organized and the rubrics that guide assessments and decision-making.

The infrastructures that store and organize data about clients are called Information Management Systems. Child Welfare workers use the Child Protection Information Network (CPIN) as their main Information Management System. CPIN data practices are shaped by the Child Protection Standards, the Eligibility Spectrum, and the Child Protection Tools.

In homelessness services, several legacy systems remain in use, but most Ontario municipalities now use the information management system developed by the federal government and provided for free by Employment and Social Development Canada. It is called the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS).

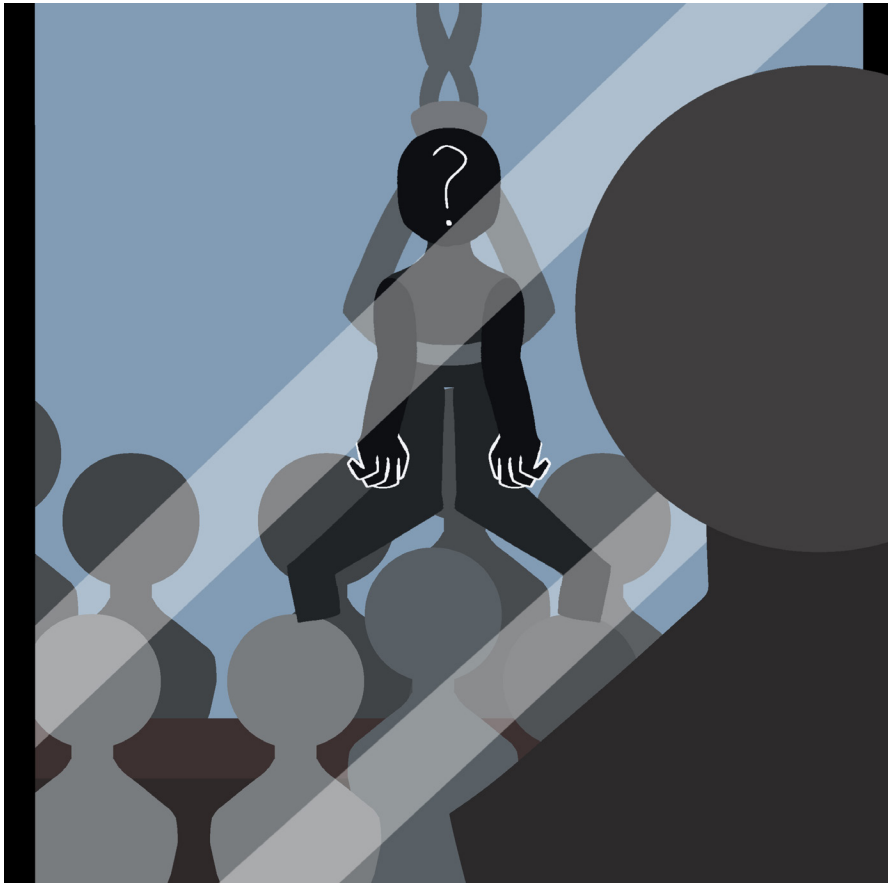
In 2021, the Province of Ontario began requiring that all municipal service managers create and maintain a By-Name List: **“a real-time list of people experiencing homelessness across the service manager area”** (Province of Ontario, 2022).

While some communities had already adopted a By-Name List (BNL) as part of their participation in Built for Zero Canada (BFZ-C), a campaign of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH), this new mandate tied provincial funding directly to the implementation of a BNL. For municipalities to receive Homelessness Prevention Program funding they are now required to have a BNL in place.

HIFIS helps municipalities populate a local By-Name List (BNL) or By-Name Priority List (BNPL) to sort clients and match them with appropriate services. The generation and maintenance of BNLs are one of the data practices that lie at the heart of Coordinated Access (CA). The CA approach to service delivery is a requirement of federal Reaching Home funding, meaning that any municipality receiving federal funds is expected to implement this approach.

Coordinated Access standards also require community entities to implement common or standardized assessments or structured decision-making processes across their service system. One commonly used tool is the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT) and the shorter Vulnerability Index - Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT). Although there is a version of this tool that is specific for youth (the Youth Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool or the Y-SPDAT), we heard more about the use of SPDATs designed for the general population in our interviews. Often these kinds of assessments are required in order for people to access housing resources within a Coordinated Access system. As one municipal system administrator put it:

"So there's a short version [VI-SPDAT] and a long version [SPDAT]. The short version is multiple choice and doesn't have details and it's a self-declared assessment, and then the longer version is more like a short-form survey so people can provide more detail and tell a bit of a story there. There are some programs that you have to have a long one to be able to be eligible for the program, but generally, the shorter version is fine." (Municipal Homelessness System Data Administrator)



DATA FOR WHO?

So who is all this data for anyway? And who gets to use it?

Despite new guidance that broadens which organizations should have access to HIFIS, the BNL, and SPDAT scores (Province of Ontario, 2022), many organizations that support precariously housed or homeless youth have a limited connection to these systems and data. Sometimes this is because of legal reasons, related to confidentiality, and other times this is just a matter of a lack of funding or training.

“[Organization 1] does not have direct access but that's just because I haven't trained them yet. Legally their access is available and I would disclose anything in that database to them, I just haven't got around to actually training the staff yet. [Organization 2] has access. [Organization 3] does not have access but it's the same deal as [Organization 1]; I haven't actually trained them but when clients provide consent, we inform them that the information will be shared...we just haven't actually trained them to go in there, mainly because we haven't really decided or determined if it actually makes sense as part of their job...[or we] don't think they would use it enough to warrant putting their staff through that kind of training ” (Municipal Homelessness System Data Administrator)

As we analyzed who is being served by HIFIS and the related data tools, infrastructures, and practices in Ontario's youth homelessness system, we were reminded of the following:

“Rules of confidentiality, corporate ownership of information, corporate systems of data storage, and so forth provide specifically for the exclusive control of texts, keeping them within the scope of specific interpretive contexts of reading and use.” (Smith, 1990, p. 95-6)

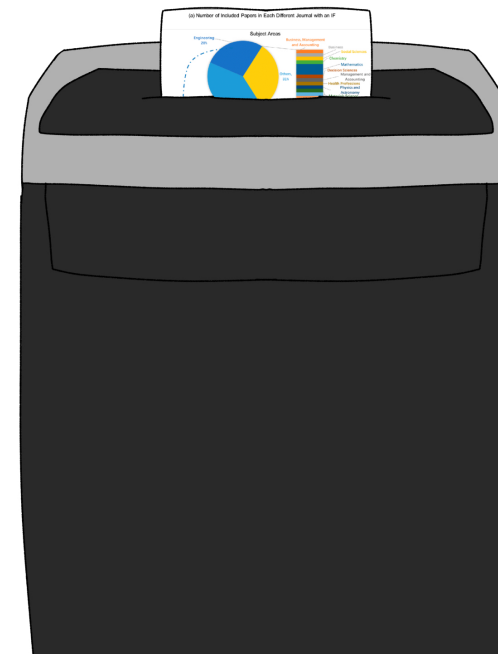
Though we do not believe that the motivations for limiting who can access centralized data infrastructures in Ontario's youth system are as insidious as Smith's quotation might suggest, the contexts in which data can be accessed and used changes the potential impact of the data. When governments and senior managers have exclusive – or even just disproportionate – access and control of data infrastructures, the potential for that data to support frontline workers and clients can be overshadowed by its uses for management, accountability, and regulation.

One of the municipal data administrators we spoke to about youth homelessness explained that her staff don't see the value in following the government mandated data practices. She explained that the promises of these digital systems – like automating reporting functions – are not set up in ways that serve frontline workers:

"So that is kind of a big issue that I think sort of disincentivizes putting accurate information in HIFIS, because they're not getting anything back...the data is there, but it's not very well automated yet...I kind of just want to tell them that like 'you're putting so much work, and we're just throwing it in the garbage,' which I think is probably common." (Municipal Data administrator)

Even management often expressed frustrations over feelings that the mandated data practices they and their team were engaging in were not serving them. As we heard from one Children's Aid Society manager who uses the provincial database known as CPIN:

"Sometimes I feel like CPIN is a machine that [we are] feeding, as opposed to the machine supporting us. And I know the machine is supporting us. But sometimes the demands of CPIN, and how hard it is to work in it... If you step outside of your area...it's not user friendly. So sometimes I wish we weren't feeding the machine." (Child Welfare Manager)



Some of our interviewees who work in child welfare explained that although the data practices they must complete are often framed in terms of how they support service delivery and improve client outcomes, they believe that these practices are more about supporting governmental accountability or legislative requirements and improving managerial efficiencies. For example, one frontline worker with a Children's Aid Society in Ontario told us:

“There is no doubt in my mind that the primary goal of CPIN is to make it easier to audit, to collect information by the Ministry. It's not for us at all...” (Frontline Worker, Children's Aid)



From our interviews with the CPIN leads at the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS), we learned that only 14% of workers' requests to improve CPIN's ability to support client well-being or service quality have been instituted since its inception, partially because programmers are required to prioritize requests by government to align the system with legislative changes that support accountability goals.

“Part of the challenge is because our sector lot requests automatically get pushed to the bottom whenever there is a new legislative change, because that takes precedence... the reportability and auditability that the Ministry needs in terms of accountability.” (CPIN Project Specialist)

In Ontario's youth-serving systems, government and senior management control the design, implementation, and interpretation of data practices. Our research revealed that data and data practices are made for the people at the top more than clients and frontline workers.

To our minds, this begs the question: if the data (and data practices) are made more for the people at the top, what do they use the data for? And how might this impact frontline workers and their clients?

DATA FOR WHAT?

Coordinated Access is a data-driven process that aims to streamline access to a community's resources through data practices that organize their local homeless population (Reaching Home, 2021). As we heard from one municipal official:

"..it's about working together as a system to make sure we're not relying on any one particular intervention, that we have a shared accountability for solving the experience of homelessness for everybody who's in our community." (Municipal Homelessness Service Manager)

And yet, much of the data gathered about precariously housed or homeless youth in Ontario is understood by workers as serving governmental requirements and aims:

"I do have to tell the province how much we spent and in which categories. I also have to tell them the types of people that access that service demographically: so that would be by age group, they're also interested in citizenship status, and Indigenous status, and veteran status, as well as their housing state at the time that they receive funding, assistance. (So, were they housed or were they homeless at the time.)" (Municipal Homelessness System Data Administrator)

The SPDAT score is meant to standardize worker practices (and homelessness resource distribution) in relation to objective measures of vulnerability to homelessness. In many municipalities, they are used to support prioritization and help structure or sort a BNL or BNPL.

"There's also something called a SPDAT, which is like a questionnaire that is done, that gives us a score that helps [us] identify an individual's needs. And then that's used towards [figuring out] which resources they would benefit from." (Intensive Case Manager at Youth Transitional Housing Program)

By gathering data about someone's experiences of homelessness and other relevant challenges (alongside data that could allow a client to be contacted), service providers are expected to determine what clients need and then match them with appropriate supports and coordinate service delivery.

In coordinating services, workers are expected to make decisions in structured ways using "textual realities" that include or are shaped by rubrics, tools, and the data they help generate. These aim to limit worker bias and standardize data processes and service delivery:

"Textual realities constitute shared, identical, and perspectiveless objects and environments, locked into decision processes through the schemata, categories, and concepts that organize them." (Smith, 1990, p. 84)

Unfortunately, as we introduced earlier, the structure of these decision-making data processes is rarely determined by clients or by the frontline workers who have direct contact with clients. In Ontario's youth systems, decisions are made – in effect – by frontline workers in communication with supervisors. However, the way these decisions are made is expected to be coordinated by policies and tools designed by other people with different interests (e.g., financial oversight and accountability) who lack ongoing direct contact with clients.

And, as we will discuss further in the next zine, the interpretive leaps that service providers make in predicting what supports a client may need – based on data about their life story – ultimately remain subjective, though often structured by decision-making tools/rubrics that provide the appearance of objectivity.

DATA BY PEOPLE FOR PEOPLE

The data that is central to the coordination of services for precariously housed and homeless youth is gathered and used by a variety of people with diverse aims and concerns. While all the frontline workers and supervisors we spoke to hoped that their data practices could be a means of improving service quality and client outcomes, they noticed that data practices were more often geared towards supporting senior management's tracking aims and government accountability objectives that fulfilled funding and reporting requirements or legislative compliance.

Both improving outcomes and tracking compliance can be achieved through people's data practices. However, our research suggests that existing data infrastructures and tools primarily orient people towards compliance monitoring and reporting.

Our research is guided by a desire to do what we can – as researchers and practitioners – to uncover the lived actualities coordinated (and often obscured) by the textual realities constructed through data.

"By pulling mind back into body, phenomena of mind and discourse – ideology, beliefs, concepts, theory, ideas and so on – are recognized as themselves the doings of actual people situated in particular local sites at particular times." (Smith, 2005, p. 25)

Sometimes, workers, managers, and government forget that the data they are working with represents real people: youth and families who are experiencing homelessness and other challenges. Before thinking about worker or government accountability, data processes must be accountable to the clients who are represented and coordinated by the data. Data for who? Data for people. Data for justice!



READ ALONG WITH US



WHAT'S UP NEXT

Coming up in our series, we will look more into specifics about what structured decision-making models look like in practice, focusing on the local Ontario communities where we conducted our research. The next zine will explore how frontline workers and clients are being served by the youth homelessness and child welfare systems – or how they might be better served by it.

We will analyze the ways that HIFIS, BNLS, and SPDATs are experienced as helpful and problematic by the workers and clients who engage with (or sometimes avoid engaging with) them. Focusing on the local particularities of how these tools and infrastructures are used and understood will help us uncover who and/or what data and data practices are serving.

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Thanks for reading!

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