

MORE THAN JUST A NAME

**Worker subjectivity in Ontario's
youth-serving systems**

DATA JUSTICE FOR YOUTH
ZINE 3



INTRODUCTION

Data can represent people, but without the same level of detail, nuance, or 'realness' that you get when interacting with a person. We recognize the importance of using data to make service delivery manageable when there are lots of people involved, like in Ontario's child welfare and youth homelessness systems. However, when using data to coordinate between people and services, it is vital to remember that clients on the By-Name List, for example, are more than just a name on a list.

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People are more than just the data that represents them.
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In this zine – the third in our series on data justice in Ontario's youth homelessness and child welfare systems – we explore the local particularities of how data systems and processes frame what is known about youth, and in turn shape what workers are doing to support clients and improve outcomes.

In the first part of our analysis, we look at the ways in which the tools used to store and process client data in standardized ways are experienced by frontline workers as both limited and limiting. In the second part, we unpack the subjective, human leaps that are required to meaningfully work with the impersonal, technological tools and infrastructures that have been introduced to structure decision making in the provision of youth homelessness services and child welfare.

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PART I: THE POLITICS OF DATA

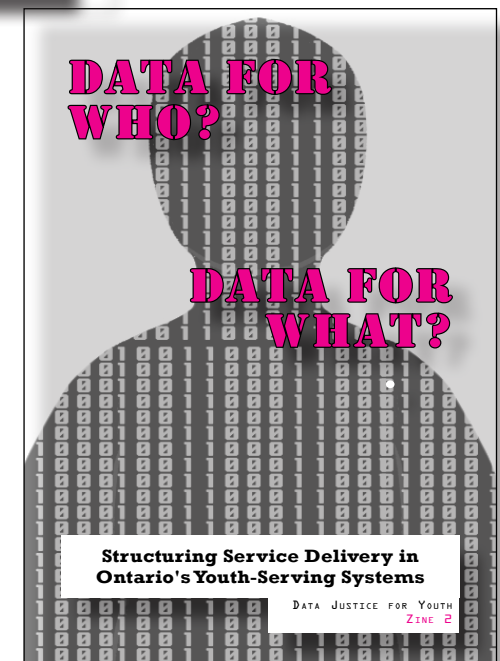
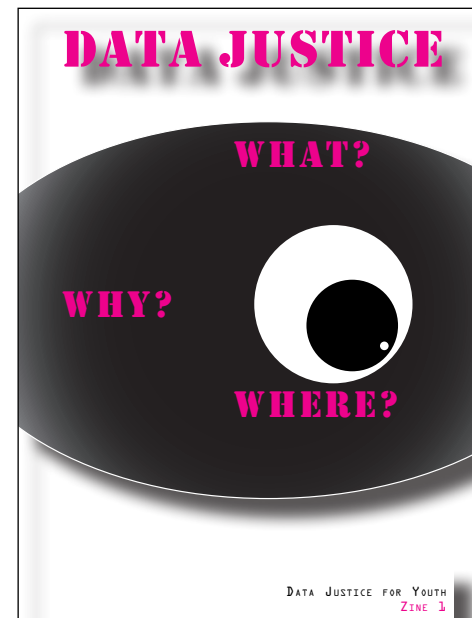
Dorothy Smith wrote about how a government's mandated data practices – including the tools and infrastructures that workers are required to use – shape data by structuring the processes by which data is generated:

“The categories structuring data collection are already organized by a predetermined schema; the data produced becomes the reality intended by the schema” (Smith, 1990, p. 93).

The integration of data practices into state systems shape how data is produced and used such that it cannot be taken as an objective account of the reality it represents. When researchers, policy makers, or workers interpret and use data, then, they must account for the "complex of legally enforced practices" (Smith, 1990, p. 88) that shape the data – potentially distorting the lived actualities the data is meant to represent.

In the previous zine, we described the suite of tools and infrastructures used to support structured decision making in Ontario's youth homelessness and child welfare systems – with a primary focus on the former. In next few pages, we analyze the actual operations of three of the tools/infrastructures commonly used in homelessness services and by some child welfare workers: the most prevalent homelessness management information system (HIFIS), vulnerability/acuity assessments (SPDAT or VI-SPDAT), and the By-Name List (BNL).

If you need a refresher on any of these tools or infrastructures, we recommend you look back to the previous zines in this series before reading on...



DATA CREATION

While data collection systems may be organized from afar, they operate on the ground in real interactions between workers and clients. It was clear to our interviewees that their capacity to gather accurate data and use it effectively is dependent on the availability of processes and infrastructure that support workers and clients on the frontline.

"It's about like, how do we make sure HIFIS is designed [so] that the users want to use it and are using it well, and they see it as being a tool that's going to help them do the work and help them serve clients? If it's not that to them, then we have a problem because that's what it needs to be for them in order for it to become something that generates meaningful data, and something that helps them with their day-to-day practice." (Municipal Homelessness Data Administrator)

Similarly, we spoke with one worker who runs a program to help youth in the child welfare system (and those aging out of it) navigate community services. This worker does not have access to data infrastructures like HIIFS for accessing or entering data.

"If we could access [shared data infrastructures], I think we could contribute to those things. And we ourselves could offer a lot of insight and paint a lot more of the youth's picture and things like that." (Frontline Worker)

For data practices to serve clients and those working most directly to support them, we keep hearing that these frontline stakeholders need to have more of a meaningful role in setting policy related to coordinating data practices and analyzing/interpreting data.

In the current system, many of the workers we spoke to did not believe that their data practices were improving client outcomes.

"I collect data because I have to collect data. And right now, I don't see a benefit...when I'm thinking of like, 'oh, my goodness, how is this positively impacting the homeless youth I serve?' It's not. It's just ensuring that the same funding I've got is going to keep going." (Program Manager)

Workers have hope though! We spoke to one worker – a child and youth services director – who discussed how valuable data could be if clients were more involved in the data practices that coordinated their experiences with social service delivery (in this case, child welfare services).

"It should be a system that allows recipients of service to be able to add some of their own data. That might seem weird but if we look at them as partners and collaborators and [tell youth] 'you're the owner of the data, I don't own the data, it's your data I'm just keeping it'...What does that look like?" (Child and Youth Services Director)

A rights-based perspective on data can position public agencies and institutions as stewards rather than owners of young people's information. A responsible data steward ensures data practices are used to improve client experiences and outcomes.

DATA PRIVACY

To effectively serve clients, data practices and infrastructures need to work for the frontline employees using them to support clients and improve outcomes. At times though, these workers shared that HIFIS can function as a barrier to organizational autonomy and client engagement.

For example, one manager of a supportive housing program explained her reluctance to adopt HIFIS because of issues related to confidentiality and protection of health information. This reluctance is especially felt when a housing placement cannot be guaranteed.



Interviewer: So you don't input [data] into HIFIS?

Program Manager: No, we do not. It's a risky system for us because of our like PHIPAA [Personal Health Information Protection and Access Act] laws, and we're...healthcare custodians and it's not as easy for us to [use HIFIS]. It needs lots of protocol around how we would be using it. And we also have discomfort with going into a system that you can see that much information about people that you're not involved in their care. So I don't love that. I think it's too accessible for staff and to look up if clients are at the shelter...I think it's unfair to the person. They need to be protected wherever they are, and workers shouldn't have that kind of access in my opinion... There's all kinds of very intrusive information that the client might say, "Yes, I'll go on the By Name List. But I don't want to share all of this because like, why do you need to know that to house me?" So I think that creates a barrier for people.

Interviewer: Clients?

Program Manager: And for us too because I don't know that I want to put all that information in that people can see. Even if they're consenting. I think the By Name List is hard for staff to understand. Nevermind trying to explain it to a client. [laughs] Like, right, like, "Oh, you're gonna be put--" "So I'm getting housed?" That's all they care about at the end of the day.

Where participation in data processes (e.g., being added to the By-Name List of people experiencing homelessness) exposes a client to surveillance and does not lead to improved client outcomes, workers can be reluctant to participate. This reluctance reflects a desire to do no harm.

DATA HARMS

We've discussed the SPDAT questionnaire that is used to measure clients' acuity and prioritize those who need support the most. Exploring the SPDAT with our interviewees, we heard many of the workers who use the tool questioning its value or describing its harmful impacts. Here are a few of the quotations we heard from frontline workers:

"The SPDAT is like a traumatizing tool, especially for young people."

"SPDAT assessments are ridiculous and stupid. And I hate them very much."

"I love data...But again, at the end of the day, like yeah. Sometimes, I think a lot about harm, like, I'm putting through like, I'm putting youth through like SPDATs, and SPDATs are not fun. I don't know if you've read the SPDAT, but SPDATs are like, they ask you really horrible traumatic things, like really, really dark, scary things. And then it's like, 'Okay, thanks, thanks for it, I'll just pop it on the system.' And again, we have no resources and things, like it's just like, it's lazy, it's dangerous, there's so many things that are wrong with it sometimes. So yeah. Yeah, data's cool, though, like love it."

"I hate them. It is the most ridiculous conversation ever that is not a determination of housing. I hate them. Hate them, hate them."

Taking a SPDAT can be a painful, even harmful, experience. If SPDAT testing was coupled with resources – both housing and other supports – one might be able to rationalize the potentially negative side-effects. However, the current vacancy crisis, coupled with the dearth of supportive housing programs, means that despite a high acuity score, people are seldom offered housing upon completion of an assessment. There simply isn't housing to offer them (let alone housing with support, if this is needed).

Beyond the issues with administering the SPDAT assessment and how they can negatively impact clients, we also heard that having a SPDAT score on a client's HIFIS profile can sometimes serve as a barrier to accessing housing – instead of facilitating an evidence-led referral and matching process as is intended. We spoke to the manager of a youth transitional housing program who shared their concerns:

"We have to put our SPDAT on HIFIS, and there's certain programs that like a SPDAT score is [required for] eligibility, which, again, is a pro and a con. I guess it just depends what types of services you think are more essential because, you know, to get access to like Intensive Case Management support, you have to score high, but then you can't access a [transitional housing] program like mine. And like what do people need—like housing and transitional housing, or do they need Intensive Case Management? They need both. That's what they need. So, they need both, but the city is not ready for that. So that's why that makes it hard. So, I suppose out of all the types of data we [generate], if one could potentially cause a barrier, it's going to be the SPDAT...it could disqualify people from things, even though it's not supposed to..." (Program Manager)

As the above quotations illuminate, social welfare data processes have material and emotional effects that are troubling for some workers and clients. The social and political practices through which data is generated and used shape people's access to housing and their experiences of fairness (or unfairness) in their institutional encounters.

DATA USEABILITY

Along with all of the other issues with SPDATs, people we interviewed also expressed a concern that the SPDAT tool – especially the short version (VI-SPDAT) – isn't always very accurate in predicting the kinds of services that their clients need. And relying too heavily on VI-SPDAT scores can result in clients being matched with services that aren't appropriate for their needs.

"It just doesn't always give us the best idea of what that individual needs in terms of supports and services and so we've found that if we rely too heavily on it, we're actually placing people in programs or housing that's not suitable for them and we find out the hard way..." (Municipal Data Administrator)

In connection with this issue, we heard related concerns about the By-Name List, which all Ontario communities are required to adopt, and which designated communities across Canada are required to use (as part of the Coordinated Access approach) if they want to access federal funding. Although By-Name Lists are often touted as the most effective way to connect people to services, many workers we spoke with questioned their value.

Sometimes people are left off By-Name Lists all together (because they aren't connecting with workers to update their housing status) or data is missing. Other times, people are continually left off the prioritized list (By-Name Priority Lists) used for housing placements. We spoke to a transitional housing worker at an emergency youth shelter who told us a bit about the challenges of using the By-Name List to connect young people with housing programs:

"Unfortunately, there's a lot of gaps there. Because we'll have kids who are in the shelter who haven't been homeless for very long or haven't been connected to workers or any of that, so they don't come up on the list. Or if someone hasn't done a SPDAT with them, they won't come up on the list. A lot of times our kids think that they're better off than they are, so their SPDAT scores won't be high enough, so then they don't come up on the list." (Frontline Worker)



At times, it can even be hard for frontline workers to understand why some people are left off the list to begin with. One worker explained their understanding of, and confusion about, which youth may be getting left off their local By-Name List this way:

“I think that a lot of times, they're the ones that are living rough. So, they just have no supports. We see them once or twice in the shelter, but no one's connected with them. And then sometimes I'm not even sure why they don't come up on the list. And we've asked those questions of the city, but we don't really get a very acceptable answer of why. I've been here almost 2 years now and if I look back on a couple of kids in particular that I can think of, they've been in and out of the shelter system, but never ever came up on our By-Name List, [specifically on the priority list generated by the city to identify who should be housed next]. And I remember asking repeatedly, these kids are very high acuity, they're high substance users, they're being discharged on a regular basis from the shelter system, so they're living rough. They don't have any supports, but they're not coming up on the list. So, at that point in time, we were very much going off the By-Name List. So, these kids were just getting bypassed, and I still don't have an adequate answer of why they're not on the list, and no one seems to be able to provide that answer.”

Sometimes the useability of the data (or lack thereof) is simply a function of the kinds of resources available for people who are on the list.

In the following interview with a homeless youth, we learned that – despite being well positioned to be offered housing through the By-Name List – the youth was still not interested in the housing options offered to them:

Youth: Yeah, apparently, I'm on the list. Apparently, I'm really like right there. The only reason I hadn't taken it before was because like I'm a very co-dependent person. So like, just from all the stuff that happened as a kid, I have like, major separation issues and like abandonment issues. So like, I got offered transitional housing and I denied it like three times because, like, I knew that my boyfriend wouldn't be able to be there. And we've been together for almost four years and, like, my daughter, she's two

Interviewer: And he's the daddy?

Youth: Yeah. So, like, I just couldn't

Interviewer: Yeah, that's hard. There's not a space for couples coming out of [the youth shelter]?

Youth: No.

These are just some of the examples we heard where the operations of the By-Name List – an attempt at standardizing resources allocation – break down in the reality of matching people to housing. In Part II of this zine, we will look at some of the ways that workers wield their own subjective agency alongside mandated data-driven processes (like the use of a By-Name List) to match people to housing resources.

PART II:

DATA &

SUBJECTIVITY

It might be said that structured decision-making tools and infrastructures have failed to standardize data practices and eliminate worker discretion in the youth homelessness system.

In the second half of this zine, we consider if and when this “failure” may actually be adaptive, empowering workers and improving client outcomes.

Although digital tools and infrastructures are often introduced to limit worker discrimination or bias, our research suggests workers’ discretion or subjectivity can also be a resource. Worker discretion is not the same as worker discrimination or bias – which should be avoided. Rather, our position is that ensuring space for worker judgement or interpretation can be important – for workers’ professionalism, for addressing clients’ idiosyncratic needs, and for improving technological systems’ nuanced usability (i.e., limitations). As scholar Craig Willse has noted:

“The liabilities that [the government] understands the use of [homelessness management information systems] as correcting – the ad-hoc, interpretative, anecdotal practices of the well-meaning but un-scientific social worker – critics of the electronic turn understand to be precisely the unique resource that social workers offer, a resource threatened by the use of machines” (Willse, 2008, p. 239).

Some workers we spoke to expressed comfort in being able to frame their assessments objectively with standardized rubrics that can be used to explain decisions – particularly difficult ones. In the child welfare sector, for example, one worker told us:

“You can bring that [standardized rubric] in and show what exactly it was that triggered us to be as intrusive as we are [with a family].” (Child welfare worker)

However, other workers spoke about the importance of pushing back against overly structured or impersonal decision-making tools – both because they do not provide space for worker discretion, and because they don’t even necessarily eliminate bias; they can embed it into the process in ways that are difficult to see.

For examples of how the use of standardized tools may be implicated in patterns of racial disparity, for instance, see these pieces about the Eligibility Spectrum used to assess risk and eligibility for child welfare services: Antwi-Boasiako, Fallon, King, Trocme & Fluke, 2021; Mohamud et al., 2021, or this piece about the use of the SPDAT to prioritize access to homelessness services: Cronley, 2022.

The second half of this zine will investigate some of the ways that workers’ agency is at work alongside mandated data practices – both because workers want to include their own professional perspective in their work, and because they often have to in order to make up for the limitations of the structured decision making tools that they’re mandated to use.

THE GUISE OF OBJECTIVITY

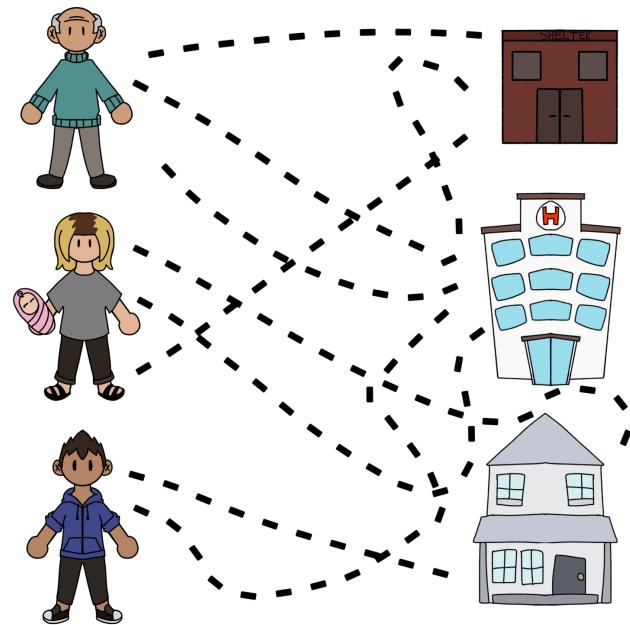
The rationale for the By-Name List is often linked to a desire to improve equity and fairness in the allocation of scarce resources.

“So, 5 years ago-ish, advocacy looked a lot different. If someone got wind of the fact that there was a housing unit open, they might call the provider, tell them a great story about their client, and if they made the most phone calls and sent the most emails and were the most annoying, there's a solid chance that their client would be the one that was offered. But the reality is that not every person on the By-Name List has the benefit of having that case worker in their corner...So if we use this method and we use the By-Name List, then it doesn't matter if you've got 10 cheerleaders in your corner or no cheerleaders in your corner, if you are the person that statistically needs access to that service the most, then you're going to get considered first. So that's the whole purpose of the By-Name List, it's to ensure that there aren't side doors for people who maybe can engage more versus people who can't, for whatever reason. So, to try and add a bit more equity into the system. And it's not just all about who's waving the loudest, saying “this is my client, this is my client!” (Municipal Data Administrator)

We want to recognize that prioritizing the housing needs of those who face the greatest barriers to housing is an important move towards equity. Yet, in talking to workers, we heard that the measures used may not be entirely accurate and can still be manipulated. As one program manager described:

“I think the way we operate the By-Name Priority List is a problem. It's great to have a list and prioritize people and do all of those things, but the prioritization is a question because it's based on SPDAT, which isn't an accurate evaluation of who those people are. So I have concerns around how that happens. And also, if you don't have a relationship with someone, are they actually going to tell you the real answers on a SPDAT question? We all know how to manipulate a stat. If I want to rapidly house someone, I know what number I have to put them at. This is not a surprise. So anybody doing a SPDAT that knows this work can manipulate the data going into a SPDAT to get [their client] housed.” (Program Manager)

The fact that standardized tools are not a panacea to ensure fairness within a social service delivery system may not be too surprising. And surely worker training and professional codes of conduct help limit blatant manipulation and misuse of data. But might there be times when subjectivity and nuanced interpretations are seen by workers as good practice?



ACKNOWLEDGING SUBJECTIVITY

Some workers we spoke to were more open to the idea that, although standardized tools can help workers strive towards a consistent and unbiased approach, there is always subjectivity involved when interpreting the results generated by these tools. As one child welfare worker put it:

"Data is so important in our work. And I would also say, as much as we're supposed to be objective, it can be subjective at times. So it's really important to know family history, and whatnot, but also understand that that's one narrative. So reading family history, in terms of data, is extremely important to understand where the families come from, what their experiences were, and how we can support them."

Because of the complexity and diversity of people's situations, mixed with the complexities of data gathered by diverse people for a variety of purposes, even decisions that aim to be objective rely on workers' personal judgement – both when interpreting the results generated by people's use of a decision-making tool and when collecting and inputting the data that might be used in these tools.

Although a standardized assessment rubric may aim to support consistency in an objective way, the data still contains traces of workers' subjectivity – as workers try to fit clients' varied responses into the fields of a standardized information management system or assessment tool, for example.

"The information that goes into HIFIS is so subjective."
(Program Manager)

CONVERSATION AND NEGOTIATION

Often, the subjectivity of decision-making in Ontario's youth homelessness system is acknowledged by workers alongside the use of standardized decision-making tools.

A balanced approach is achieved by discussing things with supervisors or holding case conferences with colleagues to debrief and confirm decisions made through the use of standardized tools. These discussions or case conferences can give context to the client's data and align decisions with the services that may be available in a particular community. They also serve as guardrails as supervisors and managers have been trained to help frontline workers identify potential sources of discrimination or bias in their decision-making.

We spoke with a senior manager who works for a municipal homelessness services division about the By-Name List. They explained how they augment or supplement the By-Name List by working collaboratively with their team and drawing on everyone's subjective understanding of clients and what supports they might need.

"We use case conferencing...I think there is a lot of value in us coming together. Again, because not all of that information is in HIFIS yet. And you learn so much about, you know, [maybe] they've been through these 3 programs before that aren't actually documented anywhere. Or sometimes a case worker has reached out but there hasn't been an intake yet and that's not indicated [in the data]. And it also does help us re-evaluate. Sometimes somebody will be referred to ICM but they're actually doing really well with an early intervention worker, and they don't need that level of resource. Or conversely, they seem like they have a lower acuity of need but then staff working with them say, 'no there's actually all this other stuff going on I think they would benefit from a higher level of resource.'" (Municipal Homelessness Service Manager)

We also spoke with a transitional housing worker who is taking the issues with the By-Name List into their own hands and making sure that youth not included on the list – or who may be misrepresented by the list – are still offered housing:

"The same people will come up all the time. And I'll write back to the city, because there's a little report that you do. So I'll write back, and I'll say this person has been offered housing, this is the 6th time, they're not interested in this housing program, or they're in a couple (they don't want to rent without their partner), but then they keep coming up on the list. I'm not sure how that part of the system works, but it's very frustrating on our part. So that's why we're trying now to do the By-Name List, as well as do[ing] applications with kids that we know are sitting in shelter, or who are living rough that we have connections with but who are not coming up [on the list], so that we can get these people housed." (Frontline worker)

When we asked this housing worker to describe how they engage with the By-Name List in greater detail, they described collaborative discussions, much like case-conferences:

"It's usually a team discussion between me and my manager. We'll have the discussion of, like, these are the kids that came up on the list, but these are the kids that really are out there. So we'll walk through it and figure out who needs this the most. And then if we choose the youth that hasn't come up on the By-Name List, then we have to rationalize to the city why we haven't gotten them off the By-Name List. A lot of times, it's just filling out that report and saying later this person wasn't eligible, this person chose not to attend. Because a lot of times we'll do an application with somebody and then we'll set up the interview and they just won't show up for the interview for whatever reason. So we usually reschedule at least one or two other times to try to get them. But then after that, we obviously move on. So a lot of times, we'll try that first even though we know those people are not going to show up, but just to appease the city, we'll go that route, which is unfortunate because then that leaves our rooms just sitting empty longer and leaves a lot of vulnerable people waiting." (Frontline Worker)

In the conversations we had with frontline workers and program managers, it appears that the By-Name List and other standardized rubrics for sorting and prioritizing clients for housing placements rarely stand on their own, especially given the intimate nature of decisions regarding housing.

Similarly, we heard workers describe the collaborative interpretive practices required in their use of the SPDAT tool to effectively assess clients' needs and decide who might be a good fit for particular supports or programs, as the following interview excerpt highlights:

Interviewer: Can you talk about the tenant selection and how does that—

Program Manager: So we have a panel of people. When people apply, they submit a referral form, a risk management form, and the SPDAT, not the full, but just the triage, like the VI.

Interviewer: The VI-SPDAT?

Program Manager: Yeah. So each person is presented to sort of like the panel. We have discussion about everyone's circumstances, we talk about what units we have, we look at vulnerabilities, accessibility, and then we sort of look at the whole clinical profile versus just, you have a score of 14, you have a score of 20. And we like, that's helpful, but that's not really how we make our decisions. It's like a triage. [laughs] Our decisions are based on like clinical need and appropriate fit.

Here we see that interpersonal accountability to a process and a set of shared values (e.g., about prioritizing those whose needs are greatest) can be an asset to cultivate in addition to – or in conjunction with – the use of tools that help us articulate and make visible our internal decision-making processes.



CASE CONFERENCING IS IT THE ANSWER?

Although case conferencing and collaborative decision-making processes are already often a part of supporting homeless youth or those in care, some workers think it should become a more significant part of the process. As we heard from a family services supervisor working in child welfare:

"When it comes to decision making and conferencing, at the end of the day, decisions made on a file are kind of made between the worker and the supervisor. We don't have a specific process for [if] we need to conference every case with let's say a director or anybody else. I think that's deeply wrong. That definitely should be changed because, you know, what we do is not a precise science, right. It's something very subjective... I would feel way more relieved if somebody would go through my files and say, you know...I think here maybe you went too much into addressing the issue of the home being dirty but maybe you lost the other piece." (Child Welfare Supervisor)

As previously noted, some workers take comfort in structured decision-making tools for the apparent objectivity they offer when making difficult decisions. However, many workers we spoke with shared that – when making difficult decisions – they take comfort in having space to reflect subjectively on a client and their context, and to collaborate with other professionals to make personalized decisions. Treating the process as entirely objective or too rigidly structured might actually limit the opportunities workers have to collaborate with one another and reflect on the decisions that they have made using these tools.

At the end of the day we have to remember the people - both clients and service providers - who are at the heart of human service delivery. Standardized tools and structured decision making processes can be helpful aids, but they don't take the human out of the equation. Relying on these tools and processes too rigidly may even make the people themselves, in their full realness, harder to see.



IN CONCLUSION

Most of the workers we spoke with were clear about the value – or at least inevitability – of workers’ discretion and flexibility in the social service practices they engage with to meet client needs.

Given more opportunities to collaborate and reflect meaningfully on these processes, workers can support one another to make decisions that avoid biased decision-making and lead to better outcomes. This is just one of the aspirations we heard about when asking workers about their dream data landscapes. In the next and final zine in our series, we will look explicitly at our interviewees’ data desires and what they believe an ideal system of data practices might look like.

We want to end this zine by observing that new structured decision-making tools and better information management systems are not going to end homelessness in the absence of continued investments in the interrelated social, health, and infrastructural resources everyone needs to be well (e.g., affordable housing, accessible transportation, high quality and accessible health care, high quality and accessible education and training opportunities, and meaningful work).

Trying to improve child, youth, and family wellbeing and prevent homelessness by augmenting data practices alone is insufficient.

As one senior municipal manager put it:

“We can be as integrated and sort of smooth in our processes as possible but if the housing is not there it's not going to make any difference.”

Even the best approaches cannot make up for a lack of resources. As we continue to explore how to improve the data practices used in Ontario's youth homelessness systems, we do not want to forget the importance of the most fundamental improvement possible: increasing the amount of funding and resources available to the people who need them.

WHAT'S UP

NEXT

In the next, and final, installment of this zine series we delve into the realm of dreams and aspirations. Through a series of poems compiled from our interview transcripts we present people's 'data desires' - what they wish they could do with data, how it could be used, and what that all could mean for people accessing services. Our intention with these poems is to not simply provide a list of policy recommendations but rather to activate our collective imagination so that together we can dream a new service reality, and new ways of living together, into being.

See you there!

READ ALONG WITH US

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It relied on contributions from Naomi Nichols, and Axel Lavictoire (who did all the illustrations). Layout and editing support by Will Pearson.

Thanks for reading!

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Winter, 2024



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DATA JUSTICE FOR YOUTH is a series of zines produced at Trent University's Research for Social Change Lab.