

Marisa Zapata:

... delete the video file. I delete the video file immediately, so this is just the audio because I don't like getting dressed up for the camera and it's tiring. So. Okay cool. Oh, there's a file that's been shared. Okay, cool. I was hoping... Okay, so let me start from the beginning.

Marisa Zapata:

Welcome everyone. I am thrilled to say that today we're going to be hearing from some really smart people talking about amazing campaign work in Chicago to get dedicated funding for addressing homelessness, but as a part of that project, some really great deep dives into the nerd world of how to estimate doubled-up populations, and why that count actually really matters to addressing homelessness. So I'm going to have everyone introduce themselves. Edrika, would you like to introduce yourself? Did I get your name correctly?

Edrika Fulford:

Yes you did, which is a shocker. My name is Edrika Fulford and I am a grassroots leader/outreach assistant with the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless.

Marisa Zapata:

Awesome. Thank you. Molly?

Molly Richard:

Hi, my name is Molly Richard. I/you/she/her/they pronouns and I'm in Providence, Rhode Island now, but I'm a graduate student in community research and action at Vanderbilt University. Yeah.

Marisa Zapata:

What year are you?

Molly Richard:

Ooh, I wish I didn't have to tell you that. I'm in my fourth year, so I have one more year left of funding.

Marisa Zapata:

That's fine. It's good to be in your fourth year. You're not going to get judgment from me on your path. That's the job of your actual faculty to give you side eye and be like, "And how far are we all on our dissertation project?" Yeah. Sam, what about you?

Sam Carlson:

Hi everyone. My name is Sam. I/you/he/him/his pronouns. I'm currently the manager of research and outreach at Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. At CCH, I support the homelessness data project, which is an initiative that aims to develop a better model for enumerating homelessness, a model that includes people doubling up.

Marisa Zapata:

Awesome. All right, well, can y'all tell me about the coalition? Who are you? What are you doing? Why is Chicago interesting for this work?

Edrika Fulford:

Well, the Chicago coalition for the homeless has been around for 40 years now. It was started in 1980, and its main mission is to organize and advocate to prevent and end homelessness. We at CCH believes that housing is a human right in a just society. Sadly, too many people have to endure the trauma of experiencing homelessness and do not have enough advocates to work with them.

Marisa Zapata:

Sam, do you want to add anything to that?

Sam Carlson:

Yeah, we have different areas of work at the local state and federal level. And I think what makes CCH unique is that we have a law department, organizing, and policy all working together, advocating for more resources that ultimately end homelessness in Chicago and in the state.

Marisa Zapata:

Also, you all have data people doing things, which I think just exemplifies what I hear or what I imagine is the best practice. You've got people doing the grassroots work, you have the lawyers who can scare people, and then you've got the data to actually back it up.

Sam Carlson:

Yeah. I might be biased but I think it's a fantastic model.

Marisa Zapata:

I mean, it sounds fun to me. Let me know if you're hiring. It sounds great. And all the things that I dream of at least of how you would actually create a good organization and excellent work to advocate for people. So what about this particular project?

Edrika Fulford:

Well, this project is called Bring Chicago Home, the project that I'm currently in love with. And what it is that we're trying to get a dedicated revenue stream and wrap around services for permanent supportive housing. We believe that permanent supportive housing is the actual best model for prevention and from people reentering homelessness. And in a nutshell, I won't go into the nuts and bolts of it, but what we are trying to do is change the real estate transfer tax, which is the tax that already exists for properties over a million dollars.

Edrika Fulford:

And so if we get them to do that, but the city council has to pass an ordinance and then referendum it, it's a lot, it's a whole... But that's it in a nutshell. If we can get that done, we can dedicate that stream, that dedicated revenue stream so that it won't be subject to the budget cuts or new administration or anything like that. We want some money to come in every year in the budget for us.

Marisa Zapata:

So we've been pretty fortunate in the Portland Metro area. And so for listeners who are based in the Portland area, we do have these dedicated funding streams now. So we've got two. If you're in the city

of Portland, we have two funds that are dedicated specifically to affordable housing only, so affordable housing development or acquisition. And then we've got one affordable housing project that encompasses our entire Tri-County area. And the most recently, and what's been in the news most, is what is called our supportive housing services measure, and that is a dedicated funding stream to supportive services and prevention for people experiencing homelessness, particularly in the area for permanent supportive housing.

Marisa Zapata:

So it can be done. It's a tough fight and we're under attack right now on that measure, people are trying to do an additional measure to decide how the money would be done. But the power of having that kind of dedicated funding is amazing. One of the things I was hoping y'all could talk about since you invoked the permanent supportive housing phrase, is what is permanent supportive housing to y'all? I was talking with some colleagues in Los Angeles and I found this in some research here in Portland that there isn't actually a shared definition across programs. And so when y'all are talking about PSH, what are you imagining?

Edrika Fulford:

Sam?

Sam Carlson:

Sure. Yeah. So we have as part of the Bring Chicago Home campaign, we have a housing solutions think tank that's thinking through what permanent supportive housing could look like, coming to a definition on this. And yeah, generally speaking, it's a housing subsidy with supportive services. What those look like is determined by providers, community members that are at this table, thinking through what that could look like, whether it's supporting programs that fall under HUD or the Department of Family and Support Services, or if it takes a different route, if it supports a housing subsidy program that will start from scratch when this is passed, we're determining what that looks like right now, but generally speaking, it's a permanent housing subsidy with supportive services.

Marisa Zapata:

Great. Thank you.

Edrika Fulford:

This is one of the reasons why it is so important and at CCH is so unique because we have people like me, grassroots leaders, who are at the table offering our lived experience to put in like, "How can you help somebody if you've never really experienced it?" And so that's what makes CCH very unique.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah, I love that because it is what I found too is what supportive services look like or mean particularly across racial groups varies pretty dramatically. And so without people at the table to actually say, "Here are what services are and what we need," the effectiveness goes down quite a bit. What matters-

Molly Richard:

Wondering if...

Marisa Zapata:

Go ahead, Molly.

Molly Richard:

Oh, I was just really curious if you all are seeing that the field is further ahead and figuring out what that means and having consistency across it for individuals, but maybe less so for families and households?

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah, I would actually-

Molly Richard:

We still might need higher supports.

Marisa Zapata:

Or different ones at least, right?

Molly Richard:

Yeah.

Marisa Zapata:

So in a project we just evaluated, the idea of tutoring being part of a suite of services isn't necessarily or likely to happen if you're just talking about individual adults or couple of household adults. And so obviously with kids being able to have access to tutors, it becomes a very different component of a service package. So why does having a dedicated funding stream matter? I think that you mentioned the importance of not having to go ask for money every year. Are there other reasons why having a dedicated funding stream are important to you?

Edrika Fulford:

Well, one of the other reasons is specifically for the fact that we know we can count on this and budget accordingly. And additionally, it's not subject to whims of a new administration, and you know here in Chicago, one can't be sure about administration, so that is a definite plus for us.

Marisa Zapata:

I mean, it's honestly no different here. It just seems like it's happier.

Edrika Fulford:

Yeah, it does. It does.

Marisa Zapata:

It's a misnomer, but yes.

Edrika Fulford:

Okay.

Marisa Zapata:

All right. Well, so let's talk about the component that you're bringing in data for. What are you thinking about? What is the importance of data in this kind of campaign work? How is it helping inform the work that you're doing? And why the inclusion of doubled-up as part of this?

Edrika Fulford:

Well, I'll let Sam speak to the data part, but for doubled-up, it is one of the reasons why the City of Chicago reports a very low number of people experiencing homelessness because they don't include doubled-up. And as everybody like myself who has been doubled up, know that is a form of homelessness, even though HUD doesn't recognize it yet. Living on somebody's couch or couch surfing or somewhere you can automatically get put out at any moment, that is really a hard, hard existence over a period of time. And then let's draw COVID into the mix where people just got really paranoid and did not want you at their house, do you know what I mean? So that's a big deal. But Sam can speak to the numbers and boats, I'm just out there.

Sam Carlson:

Yeah. So generally speaking, homelessness describes a situation where someone lacks a fixed regular inadequate nighttime residence, but-

Marisa Zapata:

That's only according to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Sam Carlson:

Yeah. But what is fixed regular and adequate, it depends on who you ask. So the Department of Education acknowledges that homelessness isn't linear. Most people experiencing homelessness, stay wherever they can, often forced to move frequently between unstable living situations, sleeping in motels, cars, trains, or temporarily staying with others. And we see that in school data during the 2019-2020 school year, only 11% of Chicago students experiencing homelessness were staying in a shelter. Temporarily staying with others is the way that most people, particularly families with children, experience homelessness.

Sam Carlson:

And like you said, the Department of Housing and Urban Development has a far more limited scope of homelessness. HUD requires that someone have a nighttime residence that's either a shelter or a place not meant for human habitation to be considered homeless and people that are couch surfing due to economic hardship, loss of housing or domestic violence are for the most part, not included in HUD's definition of homelessness.

Marisa Zapata:

So you're telling me our own federal government has two different definitions of homelessness.

Sam Carlson:

That's exactly right. Yes.

Marisa Zapata:

Sounds like it makes things a lot easier for everyone, hashtag sarcasm. Molly, it looked like you wanted to jump in and add something.

Molly Richard:

Oh, well, I was just going to maybe start by sharing how I got connected with Sam and CCH was I was a member of the Homeless Planning Council's data committee in Nashville. And similarly they were thinking, "How do we help our community realize that we need to scale the resources to the problem? And right now, the way that we're estimating the problem is through a really flawed methodology of just the point-in-time count ." And I think you have other episodes that get into that, and I don't want to get into it right now, but advocates and service providers and people experiencing homelessness in Nashville knew that the numbers that were in reports or in the news, and that were being used to dedicate resources, were really underestimating the problem.

Molly Richard:

And someone on that committee brought in Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. So it's 2016, I think, report that started to use the American Community Survey data to estimate doubled-up homelessness. And I was a new budding graduate student looking for projects, and was focused on families and still am, and knowing that even when families are experiencing unsheltered homelessness, that they're less visible, the idea of using other data was really exciting to me.

Molly Richard:

And so I reached out to Sam and Julie at CCH, and we started working together on sharing our skills and coming up with a more replicable and rigorous way to measure doubled-up homelessness using this publicly available data, so that not just Chicago and not just Nashville could spend some time doing this, but then we could share it out with other communities who are interested and similarly saying, "Okay, let's not scale the definition of the problem to the resources that we have, but really be honest with ourselves about the extent of how homelessness and housing insecurity in the country and in our communities, and then ask for what we need."

Marisa Zapata:

I'm really excited to take the methodology that y'all have worked on and look at how it plays out in relationship to some real back-of-the-envelope estimating that we did here. We literally just took... we used an annualized factor for the point-in-time count. The point-in-time count data is our one night either annual or every other year count that is mandated by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, where we are supposed to do a quasi-census style count of everyone experiencing homelessness, again, based on the HUD definition, so people who are living in shelter, transitional housing or unsheltered, and that's that category of not fit for human habitation.

Marisa Zapata:

And we took that. We did an annualizer for the unsheltered component. We used the annual assessment reports to do the shelter counts, de-duplicated. Then we just took the Department of Ed counts for all of our school districts, and put those numbers together to come up with a count to show the magnitude of difference. And so I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what y'all have found with those magnitude of differences.

Molly Richard:

Yeah. I can start by saying for the US, we estimated that around 3.7 million people were experiencing doubled-up homelessness based on our definition, which is six times the number of unsheltered and sheltered homelessness identified by HUD's point-in-time count for 2019. And it's a little bit of a different like point in time not to use the same terminology, but the ACS is a rolling average, so it sort of describes the average characteristics of a year, so at any given time, there'd be around 3.7 million people experiencing doubled-up homelessness.

Molly Richard:

So that's a little bit more, I think, useful than just looking at one single night in January, it takes into consideration different changes across the year. But yeah, that's the scale of the difference that we at least estimate based on our measure. And I can talk a little bit about how we did that because the ACS doesn't ask, "Hi, is there anyone in your household that's staying here because they can't afford to live anywhere else or they lost their housing, and they're only here temporarily and otherwise would be in the street or in shelter if they weren't living with you?"

Molly Richard:

So we used some of the existing variables, like looking at the poverty level of all the household members, their relationship to one another, and in some cases, measures of overcrowding. So to basically say, "If this person had the means to, would they likely be staying somewhere else?"

Marisa Zapata:

Which is similar to what the Department of Education asks, right. So their question is, and I think it's framed around, "If not for economic reasons, would you be living in what is defined as a doubled-up situation?" And it is, I think that very particular component of basically, if you had a different choice, would you be doing this if you had the financial resources?

Marisa Zapata:

In Multnomah County in Oregon, we actually just adopted a doubled-up definition for all of our resources and defined it as unsafely doubled-up, so that it would also get at people who are potentially breaking their leases, who they might want to actually be living together, but they actually economically can't afford to be in a bigger apartment. And so it's another way to add to some of those components.

Marisa Zapata:

But let's back up because you'd started talking about ACS and poverty levels and all of these questions. And I think that it's very hard for the average person to... I mean, it's hard for me. Let's not even say like the average person. I look at the stuff all the time and I'm like, "Where are the definitions for all of these things again?" So just to recap, we've got what's called the point-in-time count, and this is our every other year count, that has a census style that happens... well, is about one night of homelessness in that given year.

Marisa Zapata:

We have what are called our Annual Homelessness Assessment Reports, our AHARs, where you're going to be able to see people who were in shelter across the year and get those counts. And then Department of Education count, what is that? How does that happen?

Molly Richard:

I can give my best description of it, and if anybody else correct me... One reason why I say it like that is because I think it might happen differently in different places, but ideally it's a cumulative count of students who've experienced or been identified by school personnel as experiencing homelessness. And I've talked to people and say that most of the time, that can start at the beginning of the year with paperwork going out, but it's also supposed to be an active identification process where school personnel, who are the McKinney-Vento liaisons are trained to keep an eye for students who might be exhibiting signs of housing insecurity.

Marisa Zapata:

And McKinney-Vento is the Act that was done in the 1980s, the mid '80s, that set up our homelessness definitions and systems and ideas about what we would be doing. And so part of that mandate is that schools themselves have to provide services to students who are experiencing homelessness and they are entitled to particular services. Now, does this count... So if you're thinking about doubled up, does that mean that you're only really getting at kids who are in schools between K-12?

Molly Richard:

Yeah, exactly. So the existing data would just be identifying K-12 children, so that misses anybody who's not in a family, doesn't have kids. And then also families with younger kids, which we know at least through HUD's own data that families experiencing homelessness are most likely to have children under the age of three, I think. And so it would significantly miss a portion of those families.

Marisa Zapata:

Well, Sam, can you talk a little bit about what that means in Chicago?

Sam Carlson:

Yeah. So in Chicago Public Schools in the 2019-2020 school year, there were 13,843 students that were students in temporary living situations. And 12,100 of them were doubling up. So 12,000 of the 13,000 were doubling up. Comparing this to the other data points that we have available. In 2019, the point-in-time count was just over 5,000, and we know this isn't reflecting the total scope of homelessness when comparing it to the STLS data, the Students in Temporary Learning Situations, data, and comparing it to how many people are accessing homeless services throughout the course of the year.

Marisa Zapata:

What was that last data thing you said? The student...

Sam Carlson:

Students in Temporary Living Situations, that's the-

Marisa Zapata:

What is that?

Sam Carlson:

The McKinney-Vento program-



Marisa Zapata:

Okay. All right.

Sam Carlson:

... for Chicago Public Schools. And in 2019, over the course of the year, more than 22,000 people accessed homeless services. So I think comparing the point-in-time count to the McKinney-Vento data and the data on people accessing homeless services throughout the course of the year, illustrates that the point-in-time count has serious limitations and there are better alternatives.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah. This is similar to the scale difference that we found, right. We use 2017 data and it was... I think it was 5,500 or 6,000 people had been unsheltered across the year in the Portland region. And then when we looked at all the other data sources, we got up to 40,000. And so it is this scope and scale. One of the things I... Well, we'll come back to that cause I want to focus on the data stuff right now. Okay. So then Molly, you started talking about ACS and census and all these other things. So what are the other data sources that we can actually start to glean information from?

Molly Richard:

So for our project, we used publicly available American Community Survey data, which is a nationally representative survey that the census puts out when it doesn't have the full-count census. And so you can actually download de-identified data sets of individuals, how they answered this survey. And so we did that and used our shared understanding of who we thought might be considered doubled-up to estimate the number of people in different communities.

Molly Richard:

What's cool about the ACS, when we think about homelessness data, I think, in comparison to some of the other measures we have is that we can look at smaller geographies too. So that became really interesting when we were also looking at-

Marisa Zapata:

What do you mean by smaller geographies?

Molly Richard:

Yeah. So like when we were thinking about what's going on with homelessness in rural areas, a lot of folks, at least like in some qualitative research and advocacy spaces do talk about doubled-up homelessness as one of the ways that it manifests moreso than sheltered, maybe because there aren't shelters in the area or because there's more housing for people to take people in. But a lot of the rural areas are aggregated for HUD's accounts into a really large quote-unquote "balance of state continuum of care geography" which I know is really jargony, but often you'll look at a map and it's like, "Okay, that's most of Oregon. That's like the whole-"

Marisa Zapata:

It's literally most of Oregon geographically.

Molly Richard:

Yeah. Yeah, so there's one number for the number of people experiencing homelessness, at least in terms of the accessible data that we have to download from HUD. I'm sure agencies or communities might have a little bit more understanding of the extent of homelessness that's going on there. But if you're trying to put something on a map as a researcher, you've got that number. But for the ACS, there's smaller geographies, and I say that because they're not cities or towns or neighborhoods or census tracts, but they're called Public Use Microdata Areas.

Molly Richard:

So it's the extent of an area where, "Okay, the census felt comfortable enough given you this information and you can't identify who it is. It's 100,000 people." So that helped us look, for example, at... I can give you some data related to South Dakota because I have it up here, but South Dakota, the doubling-up rate, so the percent of people who we identified as experiencing doubled-up homelessness in the state was 1%, which was like a little bit less than the national rate. But when we looked at the Lakota region, Houma that Public Use Microdata Area, the rate was 5% of the population. So that's a lot.

Molly Richard:

And I think it went up too, when you look at the percent of people in poverty, some communities were up to like 15% of those folks were experiencing doubled-up homelessness by our definition. So I think there's a lot of possibility for using this national survey to look at different communities' data in a way that HUD's methodologies haven't necessarily allowed for.

Marisa Zapata:

Do you know the history of that? Why does HUD not want to talk about doubled up in this way, right? Because they're obviously serving people who are doubled up in a different portfolio. So why is this kind of rigid definition there, if you know? I actually know the answer, Molly. But it's fine, if you...

Molly Richard:

Well, I'm definitely excited to hear what your answer is. Mine would be that there's limited government resources to address homelessness. And the definition is based on eligibility for services and trying to think both, "Okay. How do we define the issue so we know who to prioritize our resources for when we don't have enough? And also how do we measure this in a way that feels like it's an attainable goal to end when we think about ending homelessness?"

Molly Richard:

So I think there's a lot of different perspectives on the nuances of the HUD definition, and advocates to end homelessness might disagree about it, but I think in general, it comes down to we don't have enough resources to fit the scale of the problem, what are some strategic ways that policymakers and providers have decided to try to rethink the problem to make it manageable?

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah. I always refer to this as the poverty Olympics games because if you look at even some of the assessment tools that we use in homelessness, you literally get more points if you are considered more vulnerable, based on a set of criteria. And so it's always like, "We are going to accept that we don't have enough resources and then figure out the ways to doll it out in particular ways."

Marisa Zapata:

Speaking of this kind of controversy between some of the advocates, this is obviously a big thing, whether you're going to talk about doubled-up or not, I've seen it nationally, I've seen it locally. I'm wondering if y'all have been encountering this in Chicago or are most people team count everyone? Sam is laughing.

Sam Carlson:

I've certainly seen this be a point of contention in other places that aren't Chicago, but I feel like CCH has done a really good job, not to pat the organization on the back, but we've done a really good job at-

Marisa Zapata:

Do it. Explain how this happens.

Sam Carlson:

We've done a really good job at advocating for people doubling up to be included in definitions of homelessness, wherever possible. So our estimate was used in the COVID relief plan for Chicago, which felt like a huge win. And CCH has been able to use our homeless estimate to advocate for new resources in Chicago. So the Families In Transition program or FIT was one of these. FIT is a joint collaboration between the Department of Family and Sport Services, Chicago Public Schools, and the HomeWorks campaign. It addresses homelessness affecting children in Chicago Public Schools by connecting 100 homeless families to permanent supportive housing. Many of these families would've been ineligible for HUD assistance and the HomeWorks campaign has been able to advocate for housing resources to meet their needs. It's just 100 families, but it's certainly a start. I think that people understand that homelessness isn't linear in Chicago, I've seen in other places though, it's a more contentious conversation.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah. It's been interesting in Portland. I definitely see the pendulum swing in the past seven years. So there was some contention and concern about adding doubled up into our local definition, a racial equity argument, there was really important and the decision to really prioritize racial equity and what we call our culturally-specific providers here because we don't want to say the non-white people serving non-white people, our cultural-specific providers were saying, "No, this is the thing. A lot of our people and the people we serve are doubled up."

Marisa Zapata:

But as our unsheltered population has grown and the visibility of the unsheltered population as Molly was saying tends not to be families in Portland, it tends not to be people of color, one, because the disproportionality is still there, but our literal numbers are much smaller. And also people of color, particularly people who are Black are choosing to not be visible for their own protection. But as there have been an increased number of areas where people are living outside and in tents, we're now seeing the fight to say all of the resources should go to everyone sleeping in a tent outside, and everyone else should have to wait. And of course, people aren't understanding the challenges in that kind of framing, but it does go back and forth, I found.

Edrika Fulford:

And can I just say that also people like me who were living doubled up were not aware that was actually a form of homelessness, and that was just something you did because you didn't have a place to stay. So that's another barrier I think that we need to address as well, and that is to actually let people know, "No, no, this is a form of homelessness." Let the public, the people experiencing it... Because if I'm experiencing it and I don't know it, I'm sure the public who's not experiencing it, don't have a clue as to the true definition.

Marisa Zapata:

This is such an important point. Oh, go ahead, Molly.

Molly Richard:

Oh, I just wanted to add that I think that is so important. And then I think Sam maybe had brought some experiences, stories in a conversation we were having once where it was like, for some people it's also the experience that they do feel like they're homeless and they're calling the Coordinated Entry to try to get assessed for homeless services, and they're saying "Actually, no, you're not. You have to have slept in a shelter. Where did you sleep last night?" And you know if you give the answer, "I was actually so lucky to be able to stay with my friend last night," then you're not going to be on the list to be prioritized for services. So just that both of those experiences are really important to think about.

Marisa Zapata:

What Molly's referencing is that when you were trying to access homeless services, you were most likely, or in theory, at least, you should be connecting with what's called the Coordinated Access or Coordinated Entry System, which is where they're assessing people to try to decide, this is what I'd call the poverty Olympics, who has the most bad check marks to be able to end up on a list. But I think this even question of how do we see ourselves in our positions of housing and security and homelessness is so important.

Marisa Zapata:

I have certainly found that as I talk to other Latinos or African Americans or Native Americans, I'll be like, "No, no, no. Remember when your friend's cousin's kid, didn't have a place to stay for two months and slept on your couch?" And you're like, "Yeah, that's cool. That happened." I'm like, "That person was homeless." Like, "Do you remember when you had to go stay in a motel in between apartments for three weeks? That is a type of homelessness." And there's a stigma that goes with it, but it's also thinking about how we ask the questions as opposed to saying, "Are you homeless or have you been homeless?" It's asking about the literal places where people have lived or slept or been.

Marisa Zapata:

And Molly, one of the things I thought was interesting was the questions that come from ACS are not about, "Are you homeless? Or are you housing insecure?" There are other types of questions that you're using to get at these particular markers. And I'm wondering if you could talk about some of those particular questions.

Molly Richard:

Yes. So the variables that we use for the measure, we look at level of poverty, so is the household itself... Can you hear that? I know you can edit this out, but my cat is scratching at the door. Is that very audible?

Marisa Zapata:

I cannot hear it. You can also let your cat in, but I cannot hear it.

Molly Richard:

I just wanted to check. So we looked at poverty relationships within the household and levels of overcrowding. And so in terms of the exact questions, I'm not sure if I could tell you like, this is how the questionnaire is worded. But one thing that we made sure to do was in terms of poverty was looking at housing costs adjusted poverty levels. So-

Marisa Zapata:

What does that mean?

Molly Richard:

Yeah. So we were talking about how the federal guidelines for poverty are national, but housing costs vary so much across the country. And so in Chicago you might actually be above the poverty line, technically, in terms of the federal cutoff, but really, really cost burdened. And so we wanted to be able to have a conservative definition, but still make sure that we're including the people who are potentially housing insecure. And so we adjusted poverty to take into consideration what the median income in a community, I'm sorry, what the median rent in a community is.

Marisa Zapata:

[inaudible 00:36:24] level.

Molly Richard:

Mm-hmm.

Marisa Zapata:

Okay.

Molly Richard:

Just to give an example of how that would shape the definition, my aunt and my cousin live with my parents in my family home. And let's see, based on our definition in terms of who would be included, just in terms of family relationships, you could consider my cousin doubled-up, but because my parents are not near the poverty line, our definition wouldn't include them because it's likely that their shared resources make the situation less temporary and less housing insecure.

Molly Richard:

And so I think that's just important for people to understand, this is not just a measure of household sharing, but it was a pretty conservative attempt to say who is sharing in a household, but really likely to... if there's one sort of economic crisis, some folks in this household are going to be literally homeless.

Marisa Zapata:

So this in some ways gets around this kind of visceral reaction I hear when I mention doubled-up of recent college graduate student, who's crashing on the couch or crashing in their childhood bedroom of their family that's making a million dollars a year. This would eliminate them.

Molly Richard:

Definitely not included everybody in our estimate of doubled-up homelessness is in or near poverty and even if they were, actually, a single adult child would not be included based on that sort of social science and cultural understanding that the household head is still responsible for this person. So they might be here for reasons other than economic hardship.

Marisa Zapata:

Okay. So when you're talking about these familial relationships, how are you dealing with cultural preferences in deciding what is considered an overcrowded household, or an appropriate relationship where your cousin gets kicked out of the circle, right? How do you decide who's in the circle and who's out?

Molly Richard:

So our measure does not take into consideration cultural preferences, it just doesn't. But I will tell you... sort of circling back on what you were saying around the culturally responsive organizations advocating for doubling up being inclusive in Portland. Our data backed that in the sense of the Latinx population, like their share of the total population is about 19% of the country. 22% of those who identified in the point-in-time count as literally homeless, so sheltered or unsheltered, but 38% of those who we identified as doubled-up. So it does give data backing to that, at least. There's data at the community level, but national level data for that understanding that a lot of Hispanic, Latinx homelessness is manifesting as doubling up.

Marisa Zapata:

One of the things that I've heard here that I really want to try to push back on is the idea that Latinos just prefer to live together in multi-generational households, or they just prefer to live together to save money, meaning they're totally fine having seven adult men in a two-bedroom apartment because that's just how they're trying to get by, and distinguishing between a cultural survival strategy versus a cultural preference, right. And so how does that start to show up? And Edrika, I don't know if you see some of that in Chicago playing out?

Edrika Fulford:

Yes. And I was also going to mention, absolutely. People don't take into consideration the cultural stigma of being self-identified as being homeless. If you ask me if I'm sleeping on my friend's couch. Sure. But if you ask me if I'm homeless, "No, no, no." So that's a big deal. In my culture, that's a huge deal. We will not self-identify as being homeless. We will self identify as sleeping on the couch for two years, but never experiencing homelessness, and that's because of the stigma that's involved with the public's perception of people who are experiencing homelessness. It's huge.

Molly Richard:

I'll share just a few there are so many great researchers who focus on Latinx homelessness, and I'll read one quote from our paper just because Susan Gonzalez Baker, I think, was looking at this issue 20 years ago, 30 almost, and she wrote that, "These alternatives of necessity in terms of thinking about doubling-up are no substitute for housing subsidies, tax and wage policies that bolster working class earnings or aggressive anti-discrimination policies that open up new sectors of the labor and housing market that are still closed on the basis of race."

Molly Richard:

And so she's basically responding to that in 1996 saying, "Sure people are having this informal support network, this informal shelter providing family resource network, but that's not a substitute for structural change that would allow people to live on their own if they wanted to."

Molly Richard:

And then I think it's Melissa Chinchilla also on the West Coast there had a paper where they were looking at barriers for shelter use among Latinx communities. And it's not just, "Okay, we have this other preference for how we deal with housing insecurity, but also there're real reasons why folks are fearful of going to a shelter, whether it's they have mixed doc status groups in their family and fear of immigration enforcement or there's really lack of language inclusivity, so lack of awareness of the communication materials that even show them where they could go, or when they're there not feeling safe because they don't understand the language, and just the way that the shelter system is designed in terms of separating based on gender."

Molly Richard:

So all of these reasons that on the short-term... let's say we can't make changes to how we have the federal resources dedicated, but programs can make their own small changes to make shelter more accessible.

Marisa Zapata:

Thank you. That was great. So I guess as we're wrapping up, I'm wondering how... tell me the life of a project like this. So how did the idea come to look at data? Is that coming from grassroots? Is that coming from the policy circles? Is it coming from the data people? And then once you get these kind of numbers, how is this then used through the organization and externally to make cases for things?

Edrika Fulford:

I believe it started with policy, I'm not sure, Sam, you'll have to speak to that. I do know that the grassroots leaders have gotten involved and due to lived experience, we've become aware again, of just the magnitude of the problem. We didn't even know even the person experiencing homelessness is not quite aware of the magnitude of the problem of homelessness in the City of Chicago.

Molly Richard:

I'm not sure if this really answers your question, but it's something I really wanted to make sure to say. And I just think that there is more focus now, at least in the researcher side of things, which is where I'm coming from, on homelessness prevention and not just bailing out the water, but turning off the tap and stemming the tide. And one of the important ways, I think, to be thinking about like all of the dialogue around definitions and doubling up, is it's not really about pitting populations against each other

because family homelessness is really, when we look at the research, it feeds into later adult chronic homelessness.

Molly Richard:

And so when people experience homelessness as children, they're more likely to experience that sort of unsheltered chronic homelessness as adults. And so if we want to really get to prevention and we do care about those folks who are sleeping outside, then one way to do that is to focus on families.

Marisa Zapata:

So that actually brings up a question. Does your measure get at adult doubled-up who are single and non-related?

Molly Richard:

Yes.

Marisa Zapata:

Okay. I just want to clarify that.

Molly Richard:

It definitely does. And I think sometimes that's lost in the policy conversation. And thank you, that's such a good point, we are often focused on children and families because they are the ones who are most visible, even though they're not in terms of the hidden homelessness population and those experiencing double-up because of advocacy in schools. And so it's really important to start thinking about who are the folks who are couch-surfing and doubled-up, sometimes that's unaccompanied youth, but also older adults who may not feel safe in shelter, may not feel safe sleeping outside, and do you have the familial or social network resources, Edrika, to your experience, but also feel like that is just like not the way to be living a healthy life and not to have the security that you deserve.

Edrika Fulford:

And also that brings up a good point too, because a person like me, I fell through the cracks. I didn't have any small children. I wasn't a victim of domestic violence. I wasn't on substance abuse or anything like that. So I kind of fell through the cracks of the shelter system and that's how I ended up doubled-up.

Marisa Zapata:

And I think that's a super common story, right? We do prioritize. And so when we prioritize, there are certain people who get left out and that often ends up being single adults or adult couples. And that's a choice that we make for a variety of reasons. Some that probably feel worse than others, but that's kind of the state of things. So Sam, talk to me about way of... I'm thinking about this as like a life cycle. How does this come together?

Sam Carlson:

Molly touched on it a little bit, but yeah, the coalition recognized this as a data need back in 2016 and we're so thankful for our partnership with Molly and her team and Heartland Alliance's Social IMPACT Research Center that helped us think through this initially. And this has been years in the making, and now this methodology's published, thanks to Molly. And we've seen this measure of homelessness be



successful in Chicago, so we're looking to expand it in other areas. So we launched the homelessness data project, which aims to expand the use of this to other major cities in the states.

Marisa Zapata:

So how do we get you to come work on it here? Or can I just replicate it with the stuff in the methodology?

Molly Richard:

You definitely can.

Sam Carlson:

Yeah, anyone can do it on their own.

Marisa Zapata:

And I'm about to go assign this to a student by the way, so.

Molly Richard:

Please tell them to email me. Yeah, it's all... there's information on how to do it. And then we're also working on ways to have it be even more accessible, just download data sets. And I just want to add to Sam's point, seeing how people have been using the numbers in Nashville and the conversations that I've had, it's not just about advocating for more dedicated resources to end homelessness once you've been experiencing it, but also to prevent it, to build more affordable housing and have new tenant protections and other sorts of prevention measures like rent control.

Molly Richard:

Even though there's conversations in Nashville, people using the numbers to talk about, "Here is the number of new units that we need at these affordable levels based on the extent of housing insecurity in the area." And so just bringing it back to yes, the homelessness response system needs to work well for people who are currently experiencing homelessness, but we also want to focus on prevention and some of those root causes.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah. And that's actually what we've used the numbers to drive to here, which was, we're going to actually in our housing needs analysis, use the numbers to estimate needed housing units or vouchers, right. This isn't about having the estimate about how much shelter space you've got, it's about actually housing.

Marisa Zapata:

So my last official question, and then I'll course invite y'all to share any last thoughts is that one of the things I love this kind of methodology, this in-depth work, I think it's so powerful. Like I said earlier, we just did a back-of-the-envelope estimate because we had to do a project in a hurry. And part of my rationale was that for the purposes of advocacy and public policymaking, it didn't really matter if it was plus or minus 10,000 people, right. It matters in certain circles, but it doesn't matter at the end of the day, if someone is saying 40,000 versus 50,000. It doesn't even matter in terms of, if I'm looking at the overall cost of funding needed affordable housing, it's still a very small portion of a difference.

Marisa Zapata:

And so I'm wondering what the motivation was to do this kind of in-depth analysis versus something that's a little bit more back-of-the-envelope?

Molly Richard:

Well, I think at the end of the day, now we're hoping it feels back-of-the-envelope because you could do it quickly. We put some work in at the front end so that it will be easy to use. And so that everybody's back-of-the-envelope notes and scribbles are the same, just to keep using your metaphor. But I think, yes, everybody... there's so many different ways, potentially, to get an estimate of this form of housing insecurity and homelessness.

Molly Richard:

But if everybody's using a similar measure, then we can make some different comparisons, track changes over time and maybe have a little bit more backing for those folks who say, "Hey, we need the data and we need it to look a certain way." We don't want to always be catering to those kinds of conversations. But when we have the tools to do it and it can help move the needle with resources, I get excited with data.

Marisa Zapata:

I do too. And it's this endless conversation I'm in, it's like, what is worth asking people to spend the time and resources on? And so that an advocacy campaigning group wanted this is particularly interesting to me for that reason. And so Edrika and Sam, I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about why a more robust methodology mattered to your work?

Edrika Fulford:

I'm really not a numbers geek like a lot of people, but I do see where the numbers would help us on the ground level. And so that is one reason why I am in such, such love with our campaign, Bring Chicago Home, because it offers wraparound services and it will offer those policy people the chance to work on getting the marriage between the two, the policy and the on the boost type working. Does that makes sense?

Marisa Zapata:

Yes, it makes a lot of sense. Sam, do you have any thoughts about this?

Sam Carlson:

Yeah. Our hope is that with a better understanding of the scope of the problem in Chicago, local groups can advocate for the resources to address all forms of homelessness, and work collectively to broaden the federal definition of homelessness. And we've heard from downstate in rural Illinois, that the point-in-time count is the only measure that they have of homelessness. And though there are a lot of limitations to that, it's the only measure they have and we're looking to change that, and add another estimate to the mix.

Marisa Zapata:

Awesome. Thank you. Well, do y'all have any other last thoughts, things that you want to share, make sure that people know about your work or about this project?

Edrika Fulford:

Well, I would just like to say, Bring Chicago Home is a viable solution, we can make a difference, and have people text 313131 to bring Chicago home. You've got to say it.

Marisa Zapata:

We'll make sure to put links to your websites on the page that we have.

Sam Carlson:

I will also take this opportunity for a plug to join our homelessness data project cohort. We're launching a cohort in April for advocacy organizations and other advocates around the country to all do a homeless estimate together. It'll be a free seven-hour training on estimating homelessness, and the sessions will include definitions of homelessness, data, understanding and preparation, I mean, data storytelling. And we're hoping that we can collaborate with these organizations across the country on a joint media release of the research findings to hopefully get national coverage and get the public eye on [inaudible 00:54:26].

Marisa Zapata:

I love this. Do you have an application out?

Sam Carlson:

You can go to the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless website.

Marisa Zapata:

I'll pull it down.

Sam Carlson:

In the Homelessness Data Project section of the website, there's a form you can fill out. Come one, come all, if you're interested.

Marisa Zapata:

I want to put the word out, I know a bunch of groups that would be super interested. Thank you. Molly. What about you?

Molly Richard:

Oh, I just want to thank everybody for the conversation, and CCH for working with me. And I'll say, I guess, if you're not a community organization that would be eligible for working on that project with CCH, if you're an individual researcher and you want to nerd out with me on homelessness data, reach out.

Marisa Zapata:

I will take this moment to say, Molly, be careful what you offer, especially if you have not completed your dissertation.

Molly Richard:

This transcript was exported on Jun 03, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Yeah. Don't tell my advisor, but I'm going to work with you anyway.

Marisa Zapata:

We'll, make sure that... It's Beth, right?

Molly Richard:

Yeah.

Marisa Zapata:

I'll make sure that Beth doesn't get a link to this podcast episode.

Molly Richard:

Okay.

Marisa Zapata:

Well, thank y'all so much. This was amazing and so much fun and y'all are doing such great work. And this is the particular intersection of my personal passions. So it's really awesome. It's going to be a great episode too because y'all speak from such different perspectives to be able to hear how all of that comes together.

Molly Richard:

Thank you so much for inviting us.

Edrika Fulford:

Thank you for having us.