

Marisa Zapata:

Hi, y'all. I am Marisa Zapata, and this is the podcast where we examine homelessness by talking to researchers and experts who of course include people with lived experience of homelessness to understand what we're missing in the headlines and soundbites. In each episode, we will help clear up misconceptions about homelessness and to answer what it would take to prevent and end homelessness in Portland and beyond.

Marisa Zapata:

Who am I? I'm an associate professor of land use planning at Portland State University and director of PSU's Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative, a research center dedicated to reducing and preventing homelessness, where we lift up the experiences and perspectives of people of color.

Marisa Zapata:

Hello everyone. And welcome to understanding homelessness with Dr. Marisa Zapata. Today I'm joined by Dr. Andres Lopez and Dr. Mira Mohsini. Both of them are researchers leading the powerful work at the Coalition of Communities of Color in the research area. So I thought we would just start off like we do on every podcast, getting to know our two guests. Dr. Andres.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Hi Marisa. Thank you for having me today. I am the research director at the Coalition of Communities of Color Research Justice Institute, and I'm a trained sociologist. So my background is in understanding how organizational inequalities along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality operate and reproduce themselves. I am a Cuban American and identify as a queer man of color.

Marisa Zapata:

Welcome. Mira.

Mira Mohsini:

Thank you, Marisa. It's great to be here. Thank you for inviting us. I'm Mira Mohsini. I'm the senior researcher at the Coalition of Communities of Color. I work very closely with Andres here at the Research Justice Institute. I am also a cultural anthropologist by training. I did my field work in India, and I was working with Muslim minority communities in that context. Minority communities and informal sector workers, primarily artisans, and really thinking from an ethnographic perspective, everyday experiences of multiple forms of marginalization, how folks adapt to those various forms of marginalization, how they resist and how those ways of being show up in work, family, religious life. And so that's really been my research and that community based perspective continues to this day. I am the daughter of immigrants. My mom is Pakistani and my dad is Indian. And so I identify as South Asian, I also identify as a queer woman of color. So it's great to be here with you.

Marisa Zapata:

Listeners will note that neither of you described yourself as homelessness experts or housing experts. And really what I think is so powerful about the work of the Coalition is to really bring Research Justice into the policy and advocacy space and to really take seriously what it means to work with communities of color and to focus on these concepts of racial equities and inequities and marginalization. And we've had some wonderful conversations about what I think that a lot of our listeners might think of as

community centeredness and research really looks like or is. So I'm wondering if you could start with talking a little bit about the Coalition and then what the Research Justice Institute is all about?

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Sure. Marisa. Thank you. The Coalition of Communities of Color is a coalition of 19 culturally specific community based organizations here in the Portland Metro region. And-

Marisa Zapata:

Can you explain what culturally specific means? Because this is very confusing for people including me.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Oh, boy. Well, culturally specific from our perspective is that members from the communities in which they're serving, are making the decisions of how to serve those communities in ways that align with their cultural values and their linguistic approaches. And so what the coalition does is that we offer capacity building for our member organizations through advocacy, leadership development, environmental justice. And of course, what Mira and I do, which is research justice. So I'd like to tell you a little bit more about research justice and what that means for us.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

So traditional research is often led by "experts," not everyday folks, right? So you have a set of credentialed people that are typically in some position of power who have been trained in a specific way of doing research. And that often respond to the dominant measurements or approaches or understandings of how research is done. And then those "experts" then do their research on communities. And so that can often be very oppressive, right? Because those who are being researched are not typically centered in the question development or in the data collection process or the meaning making of the findings of the research.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

So we believe that community members are also experts, particularly in their own lived experience and that they should have the opportunity to research for themselves and for their communities on their terms, from their perspectives. So when you look at data and research across our country, let's just think of Oregon, for example, if you're a white person living in Oregon, it's actually pretty easy for you to find fairly reliable data about your community, about your health, about your education, about your housing, the same is not true for communities of color. So there's lots of reasons for that, which we won't get into great detail today. But one reason for that is that communities of color, again, don't often get to lead those research, their questions, their strategies, their ideas are not centered in the type of research that we do.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

So at the Research Justice Institute, for us it's turning that traditional research model on its head, and instead letting our community members lead the way and define what research and data should look like for us.

Marisa Zapata:

So just so I'm fully understanding, in these traditional notions of academia, and I think we should be clear that it's Western academic conceptions of research.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Yes.

Marisa Zapata:

I always hate it when we say, "Oh, in traditional X thing." And it's like, "Well, traditional in whose framework, right?" We got to start with that. It's the lone researcher out there writing the question and the thing that they're interested in and then parachuting into a community and saying, "Hey, I want to learn from you." And sometimes there's the idea that it could be helpful, right? And sometimes it can be helpful in certain spaces, but it's not necessarily the questions that community members have about themselves or what they are actually trying to advocate or push forward for themselves. Is that another way to say it?

Dr. Andres Lopez:

That's perfect, Marisa?

Marisa Zapata:

Well, I am perfect at all times.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

When we think of research justice or the ways in which we do that work, we do it in two arenas if you will. So I'll tell you a little bit about what we call the dominant arena. And then Mira can talk a little bit more about what that means on the community side of it. So when I say dominant, I'm referring to organizations, institutions like universities or governments, or for-profit businesses. And they do research and data in really specific ways, right? According to their industry, according to their federal guidelines in a dominant way.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

And so we work with a lot of these dominant institutions to help them understand how their research and data practices are a little racist, right? And help them understand why and how to shift away from that because they are so steeped in reproducing research and data in very traditional, formal, dominant ways, right, it's not always clear the extent to which that can be harmful on communities, on how to shift those practices so they're more inclusive and more critical, actually asking better questions, more productive, actionable questions, right? Or just thinking differently about how we engage community, where there's a lot of community engagement going on these days. And a lot of dominant institutions don't necessarily know how to do that in a way that really feels meaningful and valuable for communities.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

So we work a lot with dominant institutions, helping them either with their research methods, their products, their approaches to community, their data systems internally, right? The list goes on and on with the type of consulting and training that we provide those organizations.

Marisa Zapata:

Can you talk a little bit about an example? It doesn't have to be a huge example, but an example of what that work looks like, because I think that even the dominant ways that have shown up for how we do research and collect data and analyze it can still be very opaque to most people.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for that. One way in which we've done this is, we've worked with the Oregon Health Authority in their survey modernization process. And that's a fancy way of saying, "How do we make our surveys more effective and more impactful, right?" So across our country, we ask a lot of questions about health. We do that often through a tool called the BRFSS, Behavioral Factor Surveillance Survey.

Mira Mohsini:

Behavioral Risk Factors Surveillance Survey,

Marisa Zapata:

Wait, surveillance is in there in the title?

Mira Mohsini:

Yeah. If you can believe it. Yes.

Marisa Zapata:

Okay. We're going to already start off with how that is not particularly culturally specific.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Absolutely. So the BRFSS is one example in which, it's a statewide survey, all the states do it. There's questions on there from the CDC that every state's required to ask in order to get X amount of funding, the way that they administer that survey, what they do with that data, oftentimes it's actually not very helpful or definitely does not center communities of color. So all the states across the country are trying to modernize that process, right? Another example is the Oregon Healthy Teen Survey, which is now known as the Student Health Survey, which we also conduct in our state every year.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

So we've been working with OHA to help them think about how the same questions that they've been asking for many years are actually not helpful with producing real change to people's health in our communities, right? So we get our communities together. We worked specifically with a group of Black, African American and Latina researchers, community based organization workers, and other community leaders to think about the types of questions they ask, how they ask those questions. And then ultimately, what are better questions to ask? What are better ways to organize these surveys and these research? And then to think ultimately, "What are you going to do with this in a way that actually demonstrates some change for our communities?" So that's one example in how we've worked with dominant institutions to help make their research and data a little bit more equitable.

Marisa Zapata:

What you hit on at the beginning and the end of the comments was this idea of, how does this actually impact or affect change in our communities? And I think that is often really lost by these data collection methods that are done by government, surveys are really common. In homelessness, we talk a lot about administrative data sets. And so a lot of people don't realize that when people are entering the program, they're required to submit their research for administrative and evaluative purposes. What does that mean or look like?

Marisa Zapata:

And a lot of times, as researchers, we know how important that research question and that research goal is. So what are you trying to ask and why are you trying to ask it? And yet I find frequently people who are working in a government research apparatus, can't answer either question. They're just like, "Here is the Thingamabobber. Oh, I've got this amazing data, what can I learn from it?" Of course that gives me a heart attack, because I'm like, "That's not even a culturally specific thing. That's just a bad research practice."

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Exactly. And part of the reason why that's not questioned, Marisa, is because that data and those approaches work for white people and are mostly accurate for white folks. So you could look at both of those surveys and get pretty good information about what white people are experiencing, but the same is not true for many other Oregonians from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Marisa Zapata:

All right, Mira, were you going to bring us up to speed on a couple of things now?

Mira Mohsini:

Yeah. Before I do that, I just wanted to say one more thing about administrative data that often folks may not realize is that these are data that are collected in the routine administration of programs, right? Anytime a government has any interaction or interface with a population, a client, however you want to call it. And that's just the data that's collected as an outcome of that interaction. And so these data are not designed for the purposes of research, right? As you were saying, they're not collected with a research question in mind, they're collected to administer a program. And so the fact that these administrative data get used to answer research questions without really examining the ways in which they're collected through systems that are inherently oppressive to people of color and are other marginalized groups is really, really problematic. But these data are used all the time for research purposes.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah. But wait before you pivot. I think that for homelessness in particular, this really is so important to go back to. And so in homelessness, we have the data that are stored through administrative purposes in what is called the Homeless Management Information System, HMIS for short. A lot of people get very confused about HMIS is, it's literally a database with some reporting field requirements for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, HUD. And so the programs are required to submit their data to our continuum of care, which to remind everyone is our jurisdictional governance over homelessness in each different region. And then the joint office or the continuum summarize the information, aggregate it and report it. They do some analysis.

Marisa Zapata:

It's interesting if you look at the history of HMIS, some of it was to do some research, do some evaluations, do some tracking of programs. And it has now become used for things that I just ... It hurts my brain to think of what they're trying to compare in these data sets. But, even just the things of how we assess how we get information is so problematic as a researcher. I'm just like, "I don't know if I actually can say that I know these things based on some of the data sets."

Marisa Zapata:

The other one that really comes up is what's called the data set for coordinated entry or coordinated access, which is based on a data tool called the VI-Spdat. I will never ever potentially remember what the VI-Spdat acronym is. But if you look at the protocol for the VI-Spdat, it has been well demonstrated that can add trauma to people because they're having to answer all of these very personal questions. It also has been demonstrated to be racially biased. And so that has been well documented at this point. And to add to that, we're not even a hundred percent sure if using the VI-Spdat is in fact, any better than randomly prioritizing people to receive services for homelessness.

Marisa Zapata:

So the VI-Spdat is an assessment tool that again, when I've talk to people, it's like, "Well, what is the goal of the VI-Spdat? Is it assessment? Is it prioritization? What is it supposed to be? What is it used for?" As researchers, those are basic questions to ask, right? And yet our two biggest sets of data, the information that's coming in from programs that are serving people experiencing homelessness, that is put into HMIS and then the coordinated access entry data for people who are currently experiencing homelessness and do not have a programmatic home. Both of these data sets have the exact issues that you're talking about Mira.

Marisa Zapata:

And so when people are asking me, "Well, how do we feel about this?" Or, "What do you know?" And I'm like, "Well, I know these things in theory, but I'm not comfortable with some of the things." I can tell you how many nights somebody lived in X programs housing. I feel confident that number is accurate. Everything else starts to fall apart.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Yeah. And this is absolutely true in other sectors as well since we do work for the Coalition. So we focus on housing, but we also focus on other things like education or economic justice. And the same data sets that are used to make sense of how things are going and for whom, have this have very similar problems. So in many ways we are at very different tables talking about different data sets, but that are all administered and used in very similar ways that are actually not really productive to solving problems and are certainly racist in many ways.

Marisa Zapata:

Oh my God. Thank you for saying that. This was one thing that causes me so much pain is everyone's discussion about how terrible data is around homelessness. And I'm like, "Do you think it is that much better in any other system?" No. You just suddenly care about homelessness and community. Administrative data is so problematic across the board. All right. We are here with Mira and Andres from the Coalition of Communities of Color. This is Marisa Zapata, your host for Understanding Homelessness.

Marisa Zapata:

All right Mira, I think we are about to get into the nitty gritty of what the Racial Justice Institute is. So tell us about that.

Mira Mohsini:

Yeah. So, Andres just outlined our work that is more oriented towards dominant institutions and addressing, as we just talked about, a lot of the racism that exists in their data systems and how they collect data and then how they administer surveys, all of that, right? So that's one area that we work and the other area is, the community centered and community-led work that we do. And so I wanted to just share a couple of examples of what that work looks like.

Mira Mohsini:

So some of your listeners might be familiar with this methodology called community based participatory action research. So the CBPA method is really central to the way that we think about and do research and partner and invite and have community lead that research. So CBPA generally, is a process that really does decenter that dominant way of doing research, which we've call research oppression, because it really does lead to oppressive practices and forms of research.

Mira Mohsini:

So CBPA is very much about, instead of that linear process, that dominant research goes through where you go through from the setting the research question to then thinking about how to collect data and then collecting it and analyzing then reporting it and disseminating it. This is much more of this iterative circular process where at each stage, community members are part of that process of designing the question, then are part of the process of thinking about how best to collect data. And then part of that process of collecting that data and what makes sense for the communities and the questions that they're asking. Once we've come to a conclusion of that research, then whatever findings are a product of that research, that then informs the next question that someone might want to ask. So in that sense, it's circular and it's iterative.

Mira Mohsini:

And so an example of this CBPA method that we used for one of our research project was, this was four years ago. We did a research justice project in Washington county called Leading with Race. So CDPA is also a long process. It takes years. This was a two and a half year process in Washington County, was led by a steering committee of community members. The idea of that research was to better understand people of color experiences in Washington County. And for those of you who may or may not know Washington County, it is the most in terms of racial and ethnic demographics, the most diverse county in Oregon. And yet, four years ago, we didn't have a good understanding of experiences of what it is like to be a person of color living in Washington County.

Mira Mohsini:

We have the demographic data, we have that administrative data, but what are the experiences? So that piece of research again, was led by community, we did quantitative analysis and gathered the numbers, but really the meat of it was the qualitative data, was the focus groups, was the interviews, was the methods to really understand those experiences. We're doing a similar study now. So that was four years ago. Now we're doing a similar study as CBPA or research justice study in Clackamas County,



which unlike Washington County is not as diverse in terms of racial and ethnic populations. However, that study is really also about, so we have this narrative of Clackamas County and Oregon in general that it's overwhelmingly white. And this really irks us when we hear that, because it just serves to erase the experiences of people of color and the history of people of color. And it also serves to erase why Oregon is so white, what is that history?

Mira Mohsini:

So we need to we need to better understand what are people of color's experiences in these places, having them, like Andres, and we've talked about having them lead that work is really important. Having them ask the questions that are meaningful to them. So that's what we're doing in Clackamas County. The second part of our community-led work is really working with community based organizations. This could be our members, but also other community based organizations in helping them think about and understand what is data? Because there's this dominant way of thinking about data in a particular way, that data is this, and this is usually numbers, right? Data is numbers.

Mira Mohsini:

But we know that community based organizations collect a lot of data. They collect a lot, they have a lot of knowledge and information about their communities through engaging, through providing direct services, all of the work that CBOs do, and that is data. And then we're really working with community based organizations to think about how can this knowledge that you have be, not only valued because it is valued, but how can this knowledge and this data have power? How can it be organized and packaged in a way that is meaningful for you as a community based organization, but also to those in power, right? To those who are making decisions for your communities based on really racist data. So that's the work that we do with our communities, with community based organizations, through trainings, through just other work and engagement that we do.

Marisa Zapata:

Super fascinating. And I've got a couple of questions about the racial justice work that you're doing specifically, and then some questions going back to these, as we've identified, problematic secondary data sources that we're working with. And I guess, one of my questions is, are you taking research projects to your community partners and community members? Or, are you going in and asking them, "Hey, what is it you want to know? How can we serve you?" Where is the balance between that?

Mira Mohsini:

It's hard to find that balance. We work with it with a recent methodology that is designed to be community-led. To be very honest with you, Marisa, the projects that we do are funded by funders and governments that want to know about X topic like behavioral health, like economic justice or the racial wealth gap, and many of the funders and government agencies probably know us a little bit by now and know not to be so prescriptive about what exactly it is that they want to learn about behavioral health. And so we do get some latitude about filling in the gaps around behavioral health and how to better understand BIPOC experiences of behavioral health, for instance.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah, this is the attention that I also get into with even just my urban planning students, because they want to go out and do really amazing neighborhood planning work or go out and do really amazing community engagement work. And I'm like, "But if your grant is to go work with community." Or your



boss is saying, "You got to go work with community to put in a bike lane." You're not starting from the same point as what is transit justice. And what is your space for actually doing that, versus the funder has said, it's a bike lane.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

I think this is really telling of the times, right? So 10 years ago, for a community based organization to get a contract from a government or a foundation to do research on their terms was impossible, right? This is part of why the coalition formed. Because everyone was fighting for the little bit of scraps that we could get from whatever institution that would give us money to study or do what we wanted to do, because we knew that would help our communities the best, right? So I think that has changed a lot, especially with the murder of George Floyd and COVID and how we've understood data and racism around COVID, right? I think things have really shifted where foundations and governments are a lot more flexible and open to understanding what is the community saying? How would the community approach this?

Dr. Andres Lopez:

So I think we have found a way to meet the needs of the dominant, to some extent around the questions they want answered while also framing it in a way that really feels authentic and meaningful to community, but it is definitely challenging, and I think we also are reminded that that's not always the case, right? We always tell dominant institutions, "Hey, we may or may not be able to support you with this because it depends if our communities want to be a part of it or not, and to what extent they get to be a part of it." And I think more and more, Marisa, community based organizations and communities of colors who are organized have less and less tolerance with not having enough power or enough say in how research and data is done or collected.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

And so we are really supporting that, right? And that's why we try to bring the dominant down more to the community level to help them understand, right, the questions you're asking are wrong or your approaches are harmful, right? If you begin in a different point, you may get further with our communities, right? And then on the other end, we're helping our communities understand, right here is how you already have this knowledge that you can insert into what the dominant's expecting. That's actually spelled out and detailed from your own way of thinking and seeing the world, right?

Dr. Andres Lopez:

So we're trying to find more creative ways to find that alignment, but sometimes it's just a no. Sometimes the dominant needs to just do what they need to do. So it would make sense of whatever measure they want to demonstrate how they've created change, right, with some support from community. And then there's some opportunities where they can maybe challenge that measurement altogether. We're really trying to be more creative, right, about the balance between the dominant expectation and needs and where our communities are leading us.

Marisa Zapata:

So I am very curious how you feel if you feel like people just come to you sometimes out of a tokenistic effort or how sincere people's or approaches are?

Mira Mohsini:

I do get that feeling of being reached out to for tokenizing agendas. The types of projects that I feel that most with are the smaller projects or the projects where we're just asked to consult on something or review a document or something like that. And that's fine and it's okay for us to do that because we have learned and are trained to be critical and from our position as the RJI, we can tear up a pretty bad survey design, and I think it's beneficial for them to see that. And if they want to put a stamp that says, "This is done by the CCC or whoever." That's fine if we help them create a little bit of a less racist survey, it's okay.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Yeah. I think we are trying to find, as Mira said, that balance, right? How far can we get with this organization? So I think it is tokenizing, but I think a lot of times people just don't know how far they have to go to actually get to a place that's equitable and, or provides opportunities for justice, which are two very different things, right?

Marisa Zapata:

I think that is such a generous framing and a better way to talk about it. Not just because I can be like, "Things are terrible." But also, I think this is an infinite challenge that I also experience. Can I help you? Is that actually more harmful if I make your thing slightly less harmful because now you can say, I helped you with it? Or is it the chance to make it slightly less harmful and then maybe more useful or is this the first step in a path to you wanting to be on that path to housing justice? I think that's a great way of talking about it.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

That's exactly what we're trying to figure out in how we think about it.

Marisa Zapata:

Well, this is Marisa Zapata, and I am here with Andres and Mira from the Coalition of Communities of Color. And we are talking about the importance of racial equity, racial justice and community based participatory action research.

Marisa Zapata:

Well, I wanted to shift gears now to talk a little bit about what your favorite projects have been, unless you have already talked about them all. Tell me all of your favorite things. It's like a listicle, isn't that what we call them? Or is that like super 2000, the listicle on the internet?

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Yes. That is dating us for sure.

Marisa Zapata:

I was going to say you laughed too, [frantic 00:29:50].

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Oh yeah. We're in the same boat. Yeah.

Marisa Zapata:

It's like you're with me in the old fogey club.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Mira, do you want to go first?

Mira Mohsini:

Oh sure. Okay. Favorite project. Well, I did mention this a little bit it was our statewide behavioral health project, which is officially titled, it's a real long title, sorry, investing in culturally and linguistically specific behavioral healthcare in Oregon. We did this project. It was funded by specifically the Office of Equity and Inclusion within the Oregon Health Authority. And they gave us a very broad scope of work. The CCOs, the coordinated care organizations want to know and learn and maybe have some guidelines about how to provide linguistically and culturally specific behavioral healthcare across the continuum care. And we did that. And that was the initial reason for this research.

Mira Mohsini:

It did happen during COVID. So it was a modified project because we couldn't go out into community. We had a steering committee who was, again, leading this research who were just overextended during early COVID, right? With just pivoting to providing services and all of that and just emergency crisis mode. But the intent and purpose of this research was, how can we ask better questions related to behavioral healthcare, right? And Marisa you asked this question about what is behavioral healthcare, what does it even mean? Is it even meaningful? It brings up questions and confusion and yes it does.

Mira Mohsini:

We encounter all of those questions and confusions and in the spirit of asking better questions and with the guidance of our steering committee, we were like, "We're not even going to use behavioral health as a term in our research process." And because of COVID, we ended up having to do an online survey, which was not the ideal way of data collecting, but COVID restrictions. So an example of a question that we asked on our behavioral health survey was, what types of support do children, elders, and others in your community currently need for things like stress, frustration, worry, and anger.

Mira Mohsini:

So we intentionally avoided what support do you need for behavioral healthcare? And instead added that other language, which was also easier to translate. So this was also a Spanish language survey.

Mira Mohsini:

Another area of this research that was really important for us was to move away from thinking about health and behavioral health at the level of the individual, which is such an Anglo-white dominant approach to health, and think about health in the context of a community. So in that question, we were asking about elders, about children and about broader community. However you want to define that. The third intent of this research of course was to really focus down on culturally specific and linguistically specific needs. What are those? And so a lot of that research shed light a little bit on that.

Marisa Zapata:

Can you talk about some high level takeaways?

Mira Mohsini:

Yeah. So this is not going to surprise a lot of people, but one high level takeaway was for instance, that a lot of people of color in Oregon seek out behavioral healthcare, not from dominant sources. A lot of folks, they don't go to their CCOs, they don't go to therapists or professionally licensed therapists or counselors. A lot of folks go to religious figures. They go to traditional healers, they go to cultural organizations that might have a little community clinic or something like that, or not even a clinic, just a cultural organization. We really wanted to make sure folks understood that finding.

Mira Mohsini:

We asked a lot of open ended questions. We wanted to better understand people's experiences of discrimination when they seek out care. And so we learned that the main reasons why providers are experienced as untrustworthy is because they lack empathy. They rush people through sessions. There are harmful care practices, like not diagnosing certain medications or prescribing things that don't make sense. And then there's the stereotyping, a lot of folks who identify as native or indigenous shared that they're automatically presumed to be alcoholics. So things like that were some of the things that people shared.

Marisa Zapata:

One of my favorite personal stereotyping experiences when seeing a therapist was that I showed up and the woman was like, "Do you know where to get the best tortillas in town?"

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Oh man.

Marisa Zapata:

I just, "Y'all, really? And then you think I'm going to trust you to sit here and chat with you?"

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Right.

Marisa Zapata:

"You just asked me where to get the best tortillas. Cool." Well, I think even just conversation around behavioral health conceptions is super important in homelessness, because first of all, we have this behavioral and mental health and I know for myself and a number of other people I work with, behavioral health is mental health and is also all of these other things that may not show up in one of these diagnostic categories.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

That's right.

Marisa Zapata:

And so it is this question of how do we conceive of illness differently in culturally specific groups? So I think about growing up Mexican American and people seeing curandero, which would loosely probably be translated into like a Mexican folk healer and some of the illnesses that they would treat and how

that would get translated into a US Western biomedicine framework, right? So like Susto, having a fright, gets translated into nervousness or anxiety, right? Where it's actually a different type of setup. And so this underdiagnosis and misdiagnosis has also really sat with me. Like, how do you understand the ways that hallucinations might be interpreted or treated?

Marisa Zapata:

And then you add to that where people are trying to get their healthcare or their health consult or their health community support, how are they able to maintain those networks in the face of homelessness or the face of displacement and gentrification and eviction. And so when we're disrupting the networks of where people live, we're actually doing harm in ways that we don't actually think about. Did any of your city get into the notion of the lack of behavioral or mental healthcare providers? On one hand, we're talking about how important it is to think about culturally specific and culturally competent care. The thing I hear in the homelessness world is that we simply don't have enough providers anywhere. Did that show up at all?

Mira Mohsini:

Oh, yes. That definitely showed up. That was one of the biggest barriers that across all groups, across all folks of color, regardless of how they identify in terms of race and ethnicity, that was a top barrier. That we just can't find somebody that understands our cultural background or speaks our language.

Marisa Zapata:

One of the things that I really fear right now in homelessness is that in the Portland region, we've got so much money coming in and we want to spend it as quickly as possible and bring people on board, particularly mental healthcare providers to deal with the lack of people who are practicing in the region. But we have an even more acute disparity within practitioners of color. And so are we setting up a even worse disparity for people experiencing homelessness when they are unable to get access to the mental healthcare providers who can help them and white people are. Which I want, I want everyone to get the mental healthcare they need, but again, if we're not being intentional about how we're trying to recruit people.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

And even when we are, we still miss the mark, right? So one workforce development strategy was to train more community health workers across the state, which our state has done really well and has expanded and there's lots of support in that training, but what happens after the training? Those folks are not getting hired into full-time positions? They're not actually being integrated into the system. So we heard this a lot in this research and from our community members across the state about how, even when they do approach this workforce development issue, they're still missing the mark and really seeing it through to make sure that providers of color are actually securing full-time employment across the state.

Marisa Zapata:

Andres, what was your favorite work?

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Well, one of the things that I loved that we did last year was our work on understanding or addressing the racial wealth gap. When we first applied for this funding, it was actually an RFP through the Oregon Community Foundation and also Meyer Memorial Trust. And they were looking for more information about Black, Latina and Indigenous communities in Oregon, so that they can expand their support and services to economic justice in the state. And so when we began this research, it was really framed in this dominant expectation, right? That there is enough data out there to talk about these communities. And we just got to organize it and tell the story. And we were really clear that if we did that, if we just provided you this information about these communities on what's publicly available, that it would be more of the same of what we've already had and what we've already been doing, right?

Dr. Andres Lopez:

It actually wouldn't provide new perspectives or new ideas about what needs to be done to address the wealth gap. Because as we've been talking about that dominant data is very insufficient for these communities. So, of course we did do an extensive literature review in that research. And we did provide as much information that we could find on Black, Latina and Indigenous communities in Oregon, and their economic realities, as well as what that may look like nationally. But what was really exciting about the report is that we made it really clear that we wanted to also center communities of colors' approaches to addressing the racial wealth gap.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

So in that process of yes, finding all the publicly available data, but then also talking to our community members here in Oregon, but also across the state led by Black, Brown, Indigenous folks doing economic justice, we learned so much about all the ways in which we need to address economic justice in our country.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

So what we learned most was that dominant data is important. It is important that we have these measures to understand savings accounts or housing rates, or what have you, right? The list goes on and on about what economic justice or the racial wealth gap is. But what we don't have an understanding is, how do we define wealth from the perspective of Black folks? How do Indigenous folks define wealth? How do Latina folks define wealth? And those are also communities that are not monolithic, right?

Dr. Andres Lopez:

So you're talking about folks with very different backgrounds and perspectives in culture and linguistic histories, but even thinking in the terms of those three groups, right, there was such a diversity in thought about what wealth means, what we should do to enrich our communities, right? Thinking of wealth, not just monetarily, but in terms of health, in terms of safety, in terms of cohesion, in terms of past and future generations, right? So we were able to tell a story about the racial wealth gap that wasn't just the traditional dominant data, but that was really grounded in these three specific communities of color and how they think of wealth and what they envision.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

So the report really does a good job of saying, "Yes, dominant ways, keep tracking that we can do it better as well. But also here are these culturally specific, here are these cross-cultural, and then here are ways in which dominant institutions can support that and integrate those things into their approach." So

that was really exciting for us to be able to complicate the normal dominant ideas about how to address the wealth gap and really centering our communities and their ideas and approaches of wealth.

Marisa Zapata:

This is really great. I sometimes worry and I definitely see this. I don't know if y'all do, that with all of our criticisms of administrative data of census data, right, fair criticisms that people are then like, "Well, we can't use any of that data." And I'm like, "No, you can still use it. We should still use it. We just thought to understand some things and maybe make some adjustments or consider what we're going to add to augment from a quantitative perspective, as well as from a qualitative perspective." So I think what you're talking about just provides some really great examples. Tell me about what you're up to next, next projects, next goals.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

I want Mira to talk about a really exciting report that we're writing, but before she gets into that, I want to just briefly talk about accountability, and this relates to what you were just talking about Marisa too, about yes, the quantitative mainstream publicly available data is flawed and can be harmful, but it's still important. It's still part of the discussion and it needs to be in discussion with other types of data, other forms of knowledge and understanding. And so we've been thinking a lot about accountability. And what I mean by that is, really understanding and supporting the process of accountability around research and data.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

So when most of our dominant partners think about accountability, especially as I said in the last few years with COVID and the murder of George Floyd, right? I think our governments are trying to be more accountable, right? What that means, and the way that they seem to be responding to what accountability is, is really purely thinking about measurement and quantification. So what you said, the dominant way in which they prove things, right? So they want to be more accountable in that sense.

Marisa Zapata:

As an urban planner. I do not find that to be a bad thing. I like the little indicators and the tracking with the data that are coming from data sources that update magically overnight.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Yeah, absolutely, right? We definitely need to know the number of affordable housing units that have increased or decreased in our region, right? That is absolutely important. However, what they're not thinking about with that information is the context around it or what we like to call the qualification of those things, right? So yes, we know we have more affordable housing units, but for whom do those affordable housing units actually serve? To what extent? How has implementing them created more inequitable realities? Or what were the equitable strategies in securing those units, right? Or how do we keep track of that, right?

Dr. Andres Lopez:

So when we think about qualifying, I think about those most impacted by the services, not the people who are establishing the main metrics or our government leaders, right? I'm thinking about, for example, in homelessness, those who are experiencing houselessness, right? So how are we qualifying?



How are we providing context around these dominant measures that actually come from those most impacted? But then also when our community members are talking about accountability, they're also talking about that in terms of relationality. Meaning that they want to know how are community members in relationship with those decision makers? What is the influence of the community members? What is the opportunity to shape and inform decisions? How can they be part of the process? What happens when they are part of the process and they share their knowledge and strategies and ideas, how does that actually impact decision making, right?

Dr. Andres Lopez:

We know a lot of times you start with a really good idea, but then after a year of the research and the legality issues and whatever crisis we're in, there's another outcome at the end, right? What happened in that process? How did that shift, right? That kind of accountability is missing, right? That lack of transparency is missing. And I think community members are really clear when they're saying, "Hey, we want to be a part of this process. Or at least we want to know to what extent we can be a part of, or influence this process. And we want you to be transparent with us throughout it.

Marisa Zapata:

Oh my God. I was just talking about this just like two hours ago. Just tell us what you are going to actually do and what our scope of influence is here, particularly if this is going on for three years.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Exactly.

Marisa Zapata:

Don't tell me that this is going to be a transparent, fully engaged process when 90% of the decisions are going to get made by elected officials behind the doors. It's cool, it's fine. We get it. It happens. Don't waste our time.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Exactly. And I think that's the accountability piece that's really missing because we're not listening to community. We're just thinking, "Okay, well, the community wants us to be more accountable. So what can we do with the tools we're already comfortable with and that we already value to make them a little bit better, right?" As opposed to thinking, "No, the community's asking you to be even more expansive beyond what you're doing or what feels comfortable to be doing things differently and also to centering them and being transparent in a relationship with them, right? So that our communities are more intimately tied with the decisions that are being made in our city." So that's how we're thinking about accountability, and we've made a lot of progress with some of our thought partners. We're developing tools and frameworks and other approaches to think about our accountability more robustly than just better quantitative measurements.

Marisa Zapata:

I wish I could be more optimistic about this, and I love that you're doing it. And I'm going to cheer on and on. And I'll sign every letter that you do and be like, "Yes, these things." But here are the two things that I've encountered that I think just give me so much pause and pain, and I'm going to say right now, I'm real cynical. Y'all the homelessness space, the political space, the community space is not good right

now. And so as much as I see everyone calling for data, data, data, I do not see people actually wanting to use the data or the research findings that lead us to good solutions. So I'm in a particular head space.

Marisa Zapata:

But one of the things is like all of this amazing work was done on these equity lenses here, and a fundamental question of the equity lens was, how did you use this information to make your decision? And yet I'm like at the racial justice council meeting with different organizations coming up and presenting, there are different departments for the state, showing up to present their engagement plans. And they are legit saying, "We've never asked, or we've never assessed how we use this in an actual decision." And I'm like, y'all, there is a literal document for an equity lens. There's 10 questions on it. It is not complicated. You write down the answers. And, yeah. Then I become a real condescending jerk.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

And you know why that's not working Marisa? Is that who is holding anyone accountable?

Marisa Zapata:

I know. But that was partially one of the mechanisms, right? They had to turn in their sheets and everyone could then add up what the sheets say. My dream was that those would get posted publicly or that there would be some aggregation of them.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Well, but here's the thing. When you introduce a critical question into a system that doesn't support that asking of critical questions, and there's no way for that answer or those questions to exist or thrive or be seen, right, then it has no value. So until we think organizationally about our processes, right? About how we do research, how we communicate, how we're transparent, how we document, how we're reflexive is a word we use a lot, right? Which is a fancy way of saying reflection in action in one word, right? How are you taking what you've heard? They want to know that you thought about it, that you heard them, that their ideas, their strategies have influenced the process. And when it hasn't that you were clear about why not, right? Because of whatever rule or policy or political power or whatever it is, right? And so we are thinking a lot more about what are those processes? How do we take better questions and implement them into a better process that will then bring to light the answers to those questions, as opposed to them existing in some Google drive somewhere?

Marisa Zapata:

And how do you communicate to people that they're not being relational?

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Well, we certainly can enforce organizational structures to adapt these new ways of being, but what we can do is provide guidance and we can provide guidance. We are working on a relational accountability process tool that can actually help folks document accountability and the processes that you are taking to be accountable, right. And that you can share that information internally, work collaboratively, and then have opportunities to share that back with community. So-

Marisa Zapata:

I loved this. When is this going to be available?

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Well, hopefully soon. By the end of the year or early next year, we'll be able to share more of that. But we're really excited about it because this is the piece that we feel is missing, right? With those quantitative measures. And of course, the qualifying piece that's also missing, but we think better tracking of quantitative tracking and measurements, more qualifying from those most impacted. And then also accountability processes that are relational, that the three of those things together are actually holding us more accountable and building stronger partnerships and relationships for our future.

Marisa Zapata:

I think that one of the things that's been hard in homelessness is what people think that they want data and need data for versus the things that you're talking about, right? The things that actually move us to change and better practices. I know we don't have a lot of time, so I want to make sure that I've got time for Mira to talk about her exciting things coming up.

Mira Mohsini:

Yes. Thank you. It's actually good that we're ending on this, because it wraps up, I think, a lot of what we've talked about, but we are working on a community data report, thinking about what is community data and why do we need it? So this report is really going to first think about what are the limitations of dominant data. So how we started talking about those limitations of administrative data and the ways in which they perpetuate harm and how did we get to this place where we have such a strong hierarchy of value when it comes to valuing certain types of data and knowledge over others and the ways in which the histories and the paths through which we've come to this point, I really want to articulate this.

Mira Mohsini:

And so how are these still reproducing colonial logics? How are these still reproducing white supremacist logics and organizational values like we just talked about, right? The fact that the discipline of statistics emerged in large part through eugenics, right? How statistics was used to support racist science ideas, what are the legacies of positivism? What is positivism? How can we make this ... So all of these things, right? Explaining all these things in a concise, accessible way, but really to demonstrate that this is deep. This is not just about making artificial intelligence or machine learning a little bit better, right? These are the everyday kinds of data that we rely on to make sure our systems are attempting to work for everyone, but clearly are not, and we really need to take stock of how deep this hierarchy of value goes to really understand how to undo it. So that's the first part of the report, really, really thinking about these limitations and why we are where we're at right now.

Mira Mohsini:

Then we get to this community data, right? So community data is not dominant data. Community data is the knowledge, wisdom, history that communities hold that maybe captured, or maybe understood, CBOs might be collecting them in ways, but they're not valued, they're devalued. So we really need to put forth almost a definition of what is it? What does it look like? How can it be collected? What value does it introduce? How can it be used to support communities and how can it be used to make dominant institutions support their advancement of equity, right? So this is really that second part.

Mira Mohsini:

And then the third part of the report is articulating our hopes for community data. Like how can community data guide and support efforts to organize, to fund, to value the knowledge that communities hold about their everyday lives about ... Not only their everyday lives, but about the structures that oppress them, the structures that they're continuously coming up against over and over again? So that's a little bit of an outline of what we're working on for that.

Marisa Zapata:

I love this so much. And I think, what you're talking about in the first part is so helpful. I want to offer you the chance to offer any parting thoughts.

Mira Mohsini:

We're in some interesting times. And I think there's so much good work that's being done to demystify data and research. And I would just encourage everyone who listens, to do their research, to do some reading. There's amazing work happening around critical quantitative studies. There's some amazing work happening around thinking about measuring, what are we measuring? We're measuring race. No. What we should be measuring is racism and racist systems. There's so much good work around that. And a lot of it is accessible, some of it is paywall and academic, but I think there's just some really good work.

Marisa Zapata:

Andres, what are your parting thoughts? What's your parting wisdom?

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Yeah. So my parting wisdom is to think about how whatever data source or information you're looking at, what other pieces of information or data are available for you to make sense of it, right? That just relying on one data set is insufficient, but thinking about a diversity of data, right? So how can multiple pieces of information and knowledge inform your thinking, right? So maybe that is a quantitative administrative set. Maybe that's a piece of art. Maybe that's a piece of narrative and story. Maybe that's a reflection from someone you read online, right? We are all experts in our own lived experiences. And we all have knowledge about the social worlds in which we live in, right? So we think a lot about diversity of data.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

And ultimately, my last piece is that, help us support and fund community data efforts. Because we believe that community data can save us all. And what I mean by that is that when we let folks who experience things every day, who are closest to the realities, particularly ones in which they experience structural oppression and they probably have for years or generations, right? When we let those folks lead our ideas, lead our thinking, we understand their strategies and their approaches, right, that actually will help all of us because they have perspectives that we'll never get from an expert or from a dominant dataset.

Marisa Zapata:

This transcript was exported on Jul 22, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Great. Thank you very much. This is Marisa Zapata from the show, Understanding Homelessness, and I was here today with Andres and Mira from the Coalition of Communities of Color here in Portland, Oregon. Thank you.

Dr. Andres Lopez:

Thank you, Marisa.

Mira Mohsini:

Thank you, Marisa.