Introduction and Purpose

Over the last decade, many communities have invested considerable resources into collecting and analyzing homeless system data. This data is often quantitative—meaning it represents numbers or counts. Examples include the Point-in-Time (PIT) count, the Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) or other assessment tool scores, and performance measures such as length of time spent homeless. While much of this information is mandated and can help understand system performance and disparities, it does not always reveal *why* communities are seeing certain results or other, more process-oriented outcomes. This information often requires collecting qualitative data, non-numerical narratives that describe different qualities or characteristics.

The purpose of this document is to establish an understanding of qualitative data. It is an attempt to acknowledge the historical pattern of equitable data strategies within and around the field of research and data. Data equity refers to the consideration, through an equity lens, of how data is collected, analyzed, interpreted, and distributed. It underscores marginalized communities' unequal opportunities to access data and, at times, their harm from data misuse. This document outlines how qualitative data collection can connect communities to the lived experiences of people being served or working within the homeless service system.

What Is Qualitative Data and Why Is It Important?

Qualitative data is non-numerical data. This means that it represents the aspects of experiences that are often difficult to measure through tools and assessments or are open-ended in nature. The overall objective of qualitative research is to capture snapshots of the perspectives, characteristics, and habits of communities in hopes of creating solutions that suit the needs of those impacted. Qualitative data is also a means to capture the feelings, experiences, and interactions of people while navigating the homeless service system.

Examples of Qualitative Analysis Questions

Question	For Service Providers	For People Experiencing Homelessness
How...	…do clients navigate the homeless service system? …do case managers implement different policies and procedures?	…easy was the navigation of the homeless service system? …do case managers present different policies and procedures in their interactions with you?
What...	…barriers do providers and clients face to accessing services? …are clients' experiences with different services?	…do you need to secure housing? …is your experience in accessing different services?
Who...	…do clients trust to provide information and support?	…do you trust to provide honest information and support?

Qualitative data is important because it reflects the perspectives, experiences, and emotional responses of clients and providers. It can serve as a bridge between the observer (who may or may not share identities or experiences with marginalization) and the individuals being impacted by homelessness. In the realm of qualitative research, reflections, stories, opinions, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—the things that cannot be quantifiably measured (non-numeric)—*are* the data. This information is reviewed for common themes and experiences, allowing governments and institutions to design and implement services built to meet those needs.

An example of this is housing initiatives that are developed from qualitative concepts and models that were designed by individuals with lived experiences of homelessness, and those communities being supported and resourced to explore and implement said models.

Qualitative Methods

Questions in qualitative research are open-ended and focus on listening. Consider what the problem is, with whom you need to connect and for how long, and the depth of exploration needed to answer the research questions. One-on-one interviews and focus groups are commonly used because they establish rapport while remaining transactional and subject-oriented. Focus groups are effective if searching for a thread of commonality between participants. Observation methods, such as watching clients' intake process, can be used to survey the environment and the external dynamics of a population, but there are limitations. The observation method is impersonal, is subject to the bias of the observer, and does not revolve around the perception of a community's lived experiences. Depending on the community, the observation method can symbolize surveillance, and the history of surveillance in the communities being observed should be considered.

Utilizing additional community stakeholders such as cultural services as well as nontraditional support systems such as faith-based institutions and cultural community centers that have trust and established relationships can help support these efforts. Communities can use lived experience advisory groups or boards, if available, to support the development of the approaches.

Bias in the Qualitative Approach

The lack of participation from specific groups of people in services, feedback sessions, and community discussions has historically been ascribed to a collective lack of interest, even if the group would greatly benefit. When applying qualitative approaches to community work, it is important to investigate what populations are missing from the data and why. Unexamined implicit biases of facilitators and service providers can significantly impact who chooses to participate or engage in the qualitative analysis process. Transportation support and internet access are some examples of explicit factors that impact a population's involvement in a service, session, or discussion. Implicit factors include racial and gender inequity, language inaccessibility, and services that do not accurately reflect needs. These examples point to the need for facilitators and providers to demonstrate the value of diverse representation throughout a population sample, as well as the development of strategies that address the barriers that prevent specific groups from participating in sessions and services. Ongoing reflection of personal and organizational implicit biases also doubles to avoid tokenizing the people who do wish to engage in the community work. This fortifies equitable practices on both a local and systemic level.

Pairing Qualitative and Quantitative Data

To interpret and draw sound conclusions about the results from any quantitative data analysis, communities must gather more information to assess what is happening. Quantitative data is necessary for mandated reporting and useful for analyzing trends and performance outcomes. Qualitative data can explore questions not available in your current quantitative data, but also help you draw sound conclusions about trends and other outcomes you are seeing in reports. When quantitative data is not coupled with qualitative data, it limits our ability to understand and address and present systemic inequities, and may make them worse due to misunderstanding, missing context, and overgeneralization. Qualitative data provides greater clarity around inequities and unearths solutions that may be more impactful than what is currently in place.

Consent

Qualitative data gathering through interviews, focus groups, or other methods requires **informed** consent. This is similar to how clients give consent before their data can be entered into a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) or other data systems. It involved the person participating in the data gathering agreeing to provide you with feedback that can be used for research, evaluation, or other planning activities. Informed consent extends the intention around transparency discussed earlier in the context of choosing a qualitative approach. Informed consent *informs* individuals on how their participation will support the research. This is done by requiring written or oral consent for using and disclosing information, and not relying on implied consent.

Community Examples

Austin, TX

The [Ending Community Homelessness Coalition](#) (ECHO) in Austin, Texas is using a qualitative approach to address the experience of homelessness amongst Black/African American populations. Black/African American Texans are significantly overrepresented in the homelessness system, with contrastingly disparate outcomes in terms of length of time homeless, exits to permanent housing, and overall housing sustainability. ECHO sought to create an equitable governance framework that is reflective of populations overrepresented in homelessness, including Black/African American individuals. Through direct outreach by facilitating conversations in shelters, drop-in centers, and meal distribution locations, their qualitative lens implemented informed consent and open-ended questions that captured the lens of the homelessness system from the perspective of system utilizers from the overrepresented population. This resulted in 40 applicants who expressed interest in being part of the governance.

ECHO's qualitative efforts have also been acknowledged by [St. David's Foundation's Data for Equity](#). They will now have the support needed to develop qualitative evaluation and provide tangible solutions for and with people with lived expertise of homelessness. Additionally, ECHO's Research and Evaluation team built [a dashboard](#) that provides access to homelessness data that "breaks down data by race, ethnicity, housing program type, organization, age, household type, veteran status, and several other variables." Together, qualitative and quantitative data and research methods create new possibilities within and beyond existing outcomes.

Chicago, IL

The HUD Coordinated Entry Initiative team in Chicago included three people who identify as people of color with lived experience and representatives from [the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH)](#), [All Chicago](#), The Center for Housing and Health, the [Lived Experience Commission](#), and the [Youth Action Board](#). The team aimed to address racial equity and improve housing outcomes for Black/African American persons with lived experience of homelessness, specifically those who are deemed ineligible for housing assistance based on their justice background. The quantitative data did not fully capture the frequency of housing discrimination based on race and historical involvement in the justice system. This team began to explore qualitative methods as a radical solution. They held community sessions, designed steps based on feedback from the community, and championed change in the Coordinated Entry System and for their Continuum of Care (CoC).

Rather than rely solely on the quantitative data available, they used qualitative methods by listening to people with lived experiences. The team held several informal community listening sessions, with additional affinity groups for people with lived experiences of homelessness. Across these sessions, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other people of color with lived experiences of homelessness shared that credit and justice-involved backgrounds were significant barriers to housing assistance.

This led to the development of several key strategies championed by persons with lived experiences of homelessness to improve housing outcomes for people with a justice background. The group determined that this work should live within the CoC Equity line of action, such as within a justice workgroup. Simultaneously, a developer submitted funding applications to develop an affordable housing building that will only serve people with a justice background. Partnerships like this will help as the CoC moves forward with suggestions on areas to tackle in order to house all people.