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Where to from Here? A Policy Research Agenda Based on the Analysis of Administrative Data

Abstract

This article outlines a policy research agenda based on the analysis of administrative data. Computerized records of client characteristics and their related shelter utilization patterns offer researchers a rich source of longitudinal data that makes possible a wide range of investigations and can be analyzed by using an array of multivariate statistical tools. Specifically, this article discusses the contributions administrative data can make to (1) enumerating and determining the characteristics of the homeless population, (2) understanding the effect of homelessness on related public systems, (3) gauging the effect of policy interventions on the use of homeless services, (4) evaluating the effectiveness of system-level delivery of homeless services, and (5) measuring the performance of individual homeless service providers.

The article concludes by commenting on several issues that policy makers might consider regarding the implementation of automated information systems among homeless service providers.

Comments

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Editors' Introduction

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As U.S. antipoverty programs undergo their most significant transformation since the New Deal, low-income communities and the organizations that serve them will need to prepare for the consequences. There is little doubt that a restructured public assistance system with greater work incentives will increase the rate at which families exit welfare for the labor market. But there is also little doubt that time limits and eligibility restrictions will lead to caseload terminations and income losses. How families and individuals will adjust to these cuts is unknown.

Reformers hope that the loss of benefits will compel people to return to the labor market. But local human service providers are wary that they will become the new safety net for the former welfare population, a role that they feel ill prepared to fill. Homeless shelter providers, in particular, are concerned about a potential increase in demand for their services. Indeed, there is already evidence that the rate of shelter admission increases significantly for individuals terminated from welfare—increasing 35 percent for one cohort in Philadelphia (Culhane et al. 1997). Shelter providers are further concerned because recent federal legislation has reduced resources for placing shelter residents in permanent housing, through both a reduction in new federal housing subsidies and the elimination of homeless “preferences” for public housing. As these placement opportunities shrink, people may remain in shelters longer, driving up daily demand for shelter, as indicated by data from New York City (Culhane, Metraux, and Wachter 1998).

The articles in this volume address homelessness issues in the context of the profound social policy transitions now under way and their likely impact on local service delivery systems. A range of new strategies will have to be developed to target the families and individuals for whom income entitlements and standard welfare-to-work programs have not led to self-sufficiency. These families and individuals will have special service needs, unique employment training and placement challenges, and housing instability issues. Given the recent evolution of local shelter

systems into “continuums of care,” one possibility is that these systems will try to assume (or will be saddled with) responsibility for these populations. More likely, given the costs of residential systems, is that shelters will become part of a broader mix of community-based programs (“homelessness prevention programs”) that link people with specialized employment and housing resources, including nonshelter emergency assistance resources.

Whatever the strategies, an essential component of the design of effective approaches will be reliable information. In assembling this volume, we have considered the need of communities for reliable, policy-relevant information and have selected articles that discuss the methodological issues, as well as the policy questions they address, in three key homelessness research areas: (1) descriptive research (population size and characteristics, patterns of service use); (2) analyses of causal factors and efforts to address them; and (3) evaluative research on public policy and program effectiveness. Because more than a decade has been spent in studying homelessness and the programs that serve homeless people, the field is positioned to develop more effective programs and an improved knowledge base to address the problem—however daunting the social policy challenges ahead.

This volume begins its sampling of that rich literature by examining the central issues of problem definition and enumeration. For this, we have selected two sets of paired articles. The first pair includes Kim Hopper’s historical review of the definitional quandaries created by the term “homelessness,” both for academic researchers and public policy makers, and a parallel study by David Cordray and Georgine Pion of how varying operational definitions affect the results of empirical research. The second pair of articles accepts a limited definition of homelessness and focuses on the impact of viewing the problem from a longitudinal perspective. We have selected an article by Culhane and colleagues, who analyze administrative databases to document the period prevalence of shelter use, as opposed to the point prevalence, and a new review article by Irene Wong that is the first to summarize the emerging literature on the “patterns of homelessness.” Together, these four articles provide readers with an understanding of the broad range of definitional and methodological issues in the area of population enumeration and composition, and the policy implications of varying definitional and methodological choices.

In the second section of the volume are four articles on the causes and prevention of homelessness. Although most homelessness programs and policies have focused on compensating for or remediating the individual risk factors of homeless people (e.g., substance abuse, mental illness, weak family supports), we have taken a step back to look at what the basic research on the structural causes of homelessness reveals. Moreover, given those results, what does the research literature suggest for strategies to *prevent* homelessness. We have invited Martha Burt to introduce the section and have republished her work on the factors associated with varying rates of homelessness by city. Burt's inter-city analysis is complemented by Culhane, Lee, and Wachter's study of the *intra-city* factors associated with the distribution of homeless families' previous addresses. James Wright and Beth Rubin examine how homelessness is linked to housing policy issues, particularly for people with special needs. These three articles provide a rich and textured picture of the causes of homelessness, and how they can be analyzed from a variety of methodological perspectives. The section concludes with the seminal article by Eric Lindblom that outlines a comprehensive policy approach for the prevention of homelessness.

The third section of the volume looks toward the future. Given the past 15 years of research and policy making devoted to this problem, what can we learn and where should it take us? Culhane and Metraux, in a newly published piece, lay out a policy research agenda for the future, based on their experience with the analysis of administrative data in New York City and Philadelphia. The authors see a major shift toward increased use of automated information systems to track the use of homeless services, and they describe the policy research that such comprehensive, longitudinal data can enable, particularly in light of recent transitions in social welfare policy. Martha Burt, in another newly developed piece, reviews the major signposts from the basic research and program evaluation literatures, and maps a direction for public policy and homeless programs. Nan Roman, the vice president for policy and programs at the National Alliance to End Homelessness, introduces the section and reviews the articles from the perspective of the current information needs of policy makers and advocates.

The strategic use of research and data will be critical to the success of communities attempting to respond to the restructuring of the social welfare system. Fortunately, more than a decade of research in the area of homelessness has helped to prepare the field to obtain and analyze the appropriate information. It is

our hope that this volume will give policy analysts, advocates, researchers, and students an overview of the methodological and policy issues that should be considered in research designed to support more effective policies for the future.

Authors

Dennis Culhane is an associate professor of social welfare policy at the University of Pennsylvania and a senior fellow at the Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics. His primary area of research is homelessness, about which he studies the prevalence and dynamics of public shelter use, the geographic and housing market factors associated with housing instability, and the health services utilization patterns of public shelter users. He is leading the development of several decision support software applications for public agencies, including the ANCHoR System for homeless services and various GIS (geographic information services) applications for housing agencies and community development organizations. He received his doctorate in social psychology from Boston College in 1990.

Steven P. Hornburg is Director of Policy for the Fannie Mae Foundation. He directs the Foundation's policy research and grants programs, including the Annual Housing Conference, the Policy Partners, and the Policy Events programs. Mr. Hornburg has been responsible for the Annual Housing Conference since 1990, working closely with national policy makers, academicians, trade and advocacy groups, and business leaders. He also serves as the Managing Editor for *Housing Policy Debate* and is Associate Editor of the *Journal of Housing Research*. He serves on the Advisory Boards of *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research* and the Brookings Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy. Mr. Hornburg also serves as Vice Chair of the International Committee of the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials.

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