Federal Homeless Information Needs and Local Practice

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Abstract

What would be required to produce a national homeless needs assessment? Information on the size and characteristics of the homeless population, evaluations of the effectiveness of interventions, and evaluations of the program and financial resources available nationwide would play pivotal roles in developing a comprehensive assessment. Estimates of the size of the homeless population are far less useful than evaluations of treatment and program delivery. There is no reason to focus attention on counts of the homeless nationwide.

Much more needs to be done to evaluate the capacity of the nation's program delivery system and to estimate the level and type of financial resources that flow into this sector. These same considerations apply to possible changes in what information the federal government will require of localities if the McKinney Act is shifted to a block grant. Evaluative assessments, including assessments of the barriers to serving the homeless, would prove to be of greater value at the local and federal levels than an emphasis on counts. Nevertheless, there is an argument for requiring a periodic local reporting of numbers and characteristics among the sheltered population under a new block grant.

Introduction

Policy making for the homeless population resembles in miniature the federal response to the Great Depression. The suddenness and size of that social catastrophe prompted the national government to create a host of relief agencies and programs. Much of the policy making of the period was ad hoc, and by the depression's end almost every organized group in America, including artists, was the beneficiary of some kind of assistance program. The response to homelessness has been similar. Many federal agencies have been included in the general mobilization of assistance to the homeless: the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) assists homeless veterans, the Department of Labor supports job training, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) researches the chronically mentally ill, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funds emergency shelters and supportive housing. By the author's count, eight federal agencies have more than a nominal role in funding homeless assistance.

In itself, this division of labor is not unusual. However, homelessness as a social-policy problem is unique for two reasons. First, by most estimates the homeless are a small, though highly visible, portion of the total population. They are not even a large part of the poverty population. Second, the degree of overlap in clientele among agencies is fairly clear. For example, a significant portion of HUD's Supportive Housing Demonstration program clientele is chronically mentally ill, the VA funds a domiciliary care program for homeless chronically mentally ill veterans, and NIMH funds research demonstration programs for the same population.

This overlap of clientele seems to demand some kind of collaborative policy effort. The Interagency Council on the Homeless (ICH) was established to create a forum for interagency policy discussions, with a goal of furthering agency collaboration in policy making and program management. To support policy linkages, the council sponsored a national assessment of what information is required to guide national policy making and where it would come from. This paper is a result of that assessment.

Assessing the needs of the homeless

What does Congress need to inform its decision making on homelessness? Congressional decision makers choose the appropriate scale of federal response, what that response must be, and how it is to be implemented. Is the level of federal assistance acceptable? Is the programmatic mix appropriate? How much of a direct role should federal agencies play in implementing programs? Well-reasoned answers to these questions would compose a national homeless assistance policy. Of course, there is very little in the way of an articulated national policy on the homeless, just as there is little in the way of a formal national housing policy. Instead, there is a set of policies that approximates a national policy.

To define federal information needs, it is helpful to consider what a single policy formulation effort would require. What information would be needed to formulate a single homelessness policy? Such information would consist primarily of four components: (1) an estimate of the size of the homeless population, (2) a policy-driven segmentation of the population, (3) an evaluation of programmatic solutions, and (4) an estimate of the level and sources of funding to support various levels of program response. In sum, a national needs assessment of homelessness is required.

Conceptually, the first two components are related: both are demand estimates. The second two components are supply estimates. Equal weight need not be placed on each component. Given the flexibility of policy instruments available, precise estimates of the national homeless population are not warranted. The study of appropriate program responses and resource mobilization merits far more attention than do estimates of population size and characteristics. Mandated state and local counts would not yield credible information on the size and characteristics of the population nationwide. If the McKinney Act programs are transferred to a formula block grant, however, much of the national policy-making role would be shifted to state and local levels. This shift would require considerable rethinking of what localities would be expected to provide.

Estimating the size and characteristics of the homeless population

The most ambitious approach to estimating the size of the homeless population is to conduct a national count or derive an estimate from a representative national sample. Would such a count be appropriate? There are two reasons to believe that it would not. First, a count, or even a very good estimate, would make sense if there were reason to believe that federal policy would be sensitive to the size of the estimate or the distribution of population characteristics produced by it; however, this does not appear to be the case. Second, the most credible estimates now available indicate that the scale of the problem exceeds any likely scale of federal response.

Generally, if the instruments of policy—programs, regulations, administrative policies—are highly flexible, then the level of information demanded for the intelligent use of these instruments is high. For example, for all their flaws, monthly unemployment data are routinely collected on a nationwide basis and give a fairly high degree of confidence that monthly changes in the calculated rate reflect actual changes in the unemployed population. The nation's monetary policies are sensitive enough to incremental changes that information at this level of technical sophistication is useful, though policy makers are free to, and do, ignore this information when other policy goals conflict.

Conversely, current policy for the homeless is being made in an environment with little financial or institutional flexibility. Institutional responsibility for program development and management is relatively fixed, and overall funding allocations to programs have been made based on political urgency within general budget limits. It is unclear how useful an extremely accurate count of the homeless population would be. The quality of information and the level of confidence policy makers have in its accuracy need only be good enough to signal crude changes in the dimensions of the homelessness problem.

Moreover, would such a count be technically and politically feasible? Again, probably not. A conference in November 1990, sponsored by the Bureau of the Census and ICH, highlighted the enormous methodological problems involved in making reliable counts even locally. Whatever methodology was used to estimate the population nationally, the result would be open to serious methodological challenge.

There are alternatives to a total nationwide population count, including both shelter and street counts, that would produce useful information on the size and characteristics of the homeless population. First, count the sheltered homeless based on a sample of cities, or sample the same cities and count service users, or do both. The estimate would be somewhat crude, but good enough for the use to which it would be put. Second, and more important, use information collected through surveys not explicitly geared to collecting data on the homeless. For example, the 1991 American Housing Survey (AHS) will, for the first time, include questions on previous periods of homelessness among those currently domiciled. It is likely that similar questions will be included in the Survey of Income Program Participation (SIPP). Both will yield data in areas of emerging policy making—estimates of the at-risk population and of program participation. In contrast to simple counts, the AHS and SIPP results will support efforts to explain, rather than just describe, portions of the population at risk for homelessness.

Program evaluation and information needs

The foregoing section suggests that an accurate national count of the homeless is both infeasible and unwarranted; that the same holds true for locally mandated counts; and that there are, nevertheless, useful ways of obtaining nationally representative data on portions of the population.

In contrast to population needs estimates, the evaluation of interventions and resource mobilization efforts does contribute information that matches the degree of flexibility available to policy makers. Program managers have a fair amount of control over program characteristics. Moreover, inputs and outputs are discrete and measurable, and program evaluation technologies and their data-collection requirements are fairly sophisticated. In other words, given the sensitivity and flexibility of the interventions, data of fairly high quality are appropriately collected and methodologically sound.

Program evaluation efforts yield two broad categories of data: information on the appropriateness of interventions for a given population and information on the effectiveness of interventions for that population. For example, programmatic solutions for homeless families should be geared to the ability of the families to live independently. For severely dysfunctional families, the provision of housing alone, without supportive services, is clearly inappropriate. For families that do receive appropriate program treatment, what are realistic expectations about how much progress the families can make toward self-sufficiency?

Efforts are under way that can contribute to an understanding of interventions. The most useful data are collected from the categorical grants programs: limited program objectives yield a fairly manageable set of program success indicators. Typical of the formal evaluations are those used by the VA to evaluate its Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans program and its Homeless Chronically Mentally Ill Veterans program. These evaluations contain both an implementation, or process, analysis and an analysis of program effects. Other programs that are rigorously evaluated include those of NIMH (Research Demonstration Program for Homeless Mentally Ill Adults and Families) and the Department of Labor (Job Training for the Homeless), both programs with measurable outcomes.

Most, if not all, of these efforts have been initiated and continued in relative isolation: analysis and data-collection objectives are driven by agency-specific policy and program objectives. Despite the fact that there is considerable overlap in terms of agencies' needs for information on their clientele, this information is not always appropriately shared among agencies. As a result of their failure to think broadly about more sharing of evaluative information, agencies cut themselves off from rich sources of insight about the potential effectiveness of their own programs. In other instances, federal evaluation efforts can be duplicative.

Much of what is being collected on the characteristics of agencies' clientele is being gathered for evaluation purposes. The program evaluations being conducted primarily for special-needs populations are those of the agencies mentioned earlier, all of which are traditionally human service agencies. At the same time, HUD, a bricks-and-mortar agency, has the task of overall policy and program management for the Supportive Housing Demonstration and the newly authorized Shelter-Plus-Care program. Both programs serve a clientele that is more thoroughly researched by these other agencies.

It seems that formal arrangements for sharing evaluation information may be appropriate, even given the episodic character of this type of information collection and analysis. Perhaps under the auspices of the ICH, federal agency managers should strive to establish a continuing interchange of research findings, coordination of research programs, and even funding of evaluation efforts. NIMH and HUD have collaborated on a study of housing for the chronically mentally ill. Much more of this kind of shared evaluation research effort needs to be done.

In addition to information on the appropriateness of interventions, an assessment of need would require information on resources. Currently, the understanding of the national homeless assistance delivery and financing system is extremely weak. There are no systematically collected data on the actual and potential resources that can be mobilized to meet the needs of the homeless. HUD has done very little to collect and analyze information on the McKinney Act programs. No single agency has a clear understanding of the characteristics of the shelter delivery system nationwide. There is no information on the scale of the funding nationwide that has been channeled into assistance to the homeless, and no information that would permit an evaluation of how stable that funding is.

Policy and planning data requirements

The discussion so far has focused on current federal information needs and practices. A different approach to developing national estimates of the size and characteristics of the homeless population is to use federally mandated local data-collection efforts. These efforts have included the Department of Education's (DOE) counts of homeless youth and the estimates generated by HUD's Comprehensive Homeless Assistance Plan (CHAP). Both are object lessons in the limits of such local information collection as a contributor to policy development.

In 1988 and 1989, DOE required state education agencies to estimate the number of homeless youth. These estimates formed part of each statewide plan, which was expected to assess the severity of local need and describe barriers to serving the homeless youth population. Though DOE had issued guidance on how to conduct the counts, this exercise in national counting was marked by an inconsistency of method. Some of the counts were one-day statewide estimates; others were annual. Some relied on a sample, others on the universe, of shelter residents. For purposes of comparison, the numbers were suspect in the extreme; at the same time, some state coordinators reported that shelter operators resented the burden of collecting the data.

HUD's CHAP was a local planning document required of recipients of formula emergency shelter grant funds. It consisted primarily of a community's strategy for matching the needs of the local homeless population with available or proposed facilities and services; it was, in essence, a local needs assessment. Though the CHAP requirement did not mandate local counts of the homeless population, the document had been used as a pretext for conducting such counts. Most CHAP submissions estimated the numbers of homeless, however rough, as a way of documenting local need.

The CHAP experience also demonstrates the limits to federal information collection imposed by the level of sophistication of local homeless population counts. Most local counting efforts are very simple exercises, though they do seem adequate, by and large, for the policy purposes they can be expected to satisfy. The simplest point-prevalence counts are done fairly frequently for the sheltered population, though far less frequently for both the sheltered and street populations. Even at the state level, these counts are not difficult; Arkansas, for example, conducts an annual point-prevalence count using a one-page form to collect basic demographic data. Shelter operators in the state administer these surveys. At both the state and local levels, this type of data collection requires some staff time to organize the effort and guide those who do the survey, but the direct costs are fairly small.

Nevertheless, the extreme inconsistency of method has limited the value of these documents for national policy development. Though HUD at one time had hoped to achieve some degree of reliability in local estimates by requiring point-in-time counts, a proposed rule requiring counts was dropped because of significant state and local opposition. HUD was to recommend, but not require, specific counting methods. Whether the appropriate degree of consistency would have been achieved without a required methodology is an open question.

The future of federal homelessness information

Whether conducted federally or locally, counts are much less useful than efforts to assess the effectiveness of interventions and strengthen understanding of the institutional and financial resources available to meet the needs of the homeless. If, however, the McKinney programs are shifted to a block grant, the dependence of the federal government on locally supplied data increases enormously. Much of the federal program-monitoring role will have to be supported by state and local information, including data on both project outcomes and local capacity to deliver services. New federal requirements will create opportunities to generate information that will contribute to national policy and needs assessments.

Decentralizing the program decentralizes policy responsibility as well. The current planning requirements—the Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategies—were introduced because Congress expected not only federal agencies, but other levels of government as well, to use the information they produced. This expectation implies, in effect, that a national interest is served by improved local policies. Under the needs-assessment framework, what should local information collection practices be?

In framing new requirements, the detail of population size and characteristics estimates need be only as precise as can be useful nationally and locally. Primary emphasis should be placed on evaluating interventions and the program delivery system.

In terms of the size and characteristics of the population, the federal government should not require both street and shelter counts of McKinney formula recipients. There is no reason to expect that local capacity to conduct these combined counts will improve. There is reason to expect that the quality of the shelter counts will improve, and the federal government should require that such counts be conducted. Information on shelter use and resident characteristics is useful locally—policy is flexible enough at the local, though not at the state, level to react to changes in this population. Moreover, the federal government has a compelling interest in improving local policy making by local managers of the McKinney programs.

Why should the capacity to estimate the sheltered population improve? Primarily because the grants-making and planning process will be centered locally on the recipient agencies of McKinney Act funds. Currently, agencies that have established better than rudimentary counting efforts have done so because funding has been tied to reporting. A minimum expectation that at least rudimentary counting of sheltered residents be conducted on some continuing basis seems reasonable, at least at the local level. In addition to ensuring that this information is available locally, required shelter surveys will allow, for the first time at the federal level, a rough estimate of the sheltered population nationwide.

The policy payoff from these exercises is both political and practical. The counts document continuing need and direct public and programmatic attention to the homeless. Therefore, the counts are at the appropriate level of sophistication, given the overall mismatch between local resources and documented need. In fact, counts are locally useful, *because* there is a degree of resource flexibility at the local level not available at the federal level. For example, the delivery of shelter and services to the homeless depends to a large extent on volunteers. Sustaining a level of voluntary commitment to an issue depends very much on the local visibility of that issue.

Though counts at the local level probably should be required, the clear emphasis should be on evaluation of the program delivery network and the barriers to serving the homeless. What evaluative assessments of programs and program delivery should be required? Minimum requirements should include some inventory of facilities and programs and a list of state and local funding sources. Both types of information are needed locally anyway. If consolidated at the federal level, the accumulation of information on the delivery network nationwide would supply one critical missing component of current understanding.

Furthermore, some assessment of the barriers to serving the homeless population is needed. The annual DOE count, though meaningless for national assessment purposes, did require qualitative assessments of the barriers to serving homeless youth. These qualitative assessments—of school attendance and health records transfer policies, school opening and closing hours, and transportation—in some states highlighted the need to introduce more flexibility in school district policies to accommodate the special needs of homeless youth. These assessments were not generalizable survey results, but they provided information that was appropriate to the degree of policy control in a way that counts could not have.

As at the federal level, localities do collect evaluative information on special populations or programs. Typically conducted by consultants, these one-time efforts are similar in method and program intent to national efforts. For example, the City of New York contracted with New York University to produce a risk-assessment methodology for recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). This effort used shelter intake and AFDC certification procedures to collect data on the sheltered and housed AFDC population. The analysis produced a set of risk factors that increase the likelihood of episodes of homelessness. The methodology is transferable; the results may well be also. As with federal evaluative efforts, an important next step is sharing research findings in the interests of program development and building a body of explanatory work.

Summary and conclusion

If coordination of national policy for the homeless is a desirable goal, improvements are needed in the collection and dissemination of federal information on the homeless and programs for them. This paper considers the types of information required for a national needs assessment: information on the size and characteristics of the homeless population, evaluations of the effectiveness of interventions, and evaluations of the program and financial resources available nationwide.

Estimates of the size of the homeless population are far less useful than evaluations of treatment and program delivery. Federal policy is relatively insensitive to the size estimates, and there is no reason to focus attention on counts of the homeless nationwide.

Certain steps, however, should be taken, such as including questions about homelessness in continuing federal survey efforts. Better coordination of evaluation efforts could aid federal policy making efforts. Much more needs to be done to evaluate the capacity of the nation's program delivery system and to estimate the level and type of financial resources that flow into this sector.

These same considerations apply to possible changes in what information the federal government will require of localities if the McKinney Act is shifted to a block grant. Evaluative assessments, including assessments of the barriers to serving the homeless population, would prove to be of greater value than an emphasis on counts. Nevertheless, there is an argument for a requirement under a new block grant for periodic reports on the sheltered population and its characteristics. Such reports would allow the accumulation of data at the federal level to periodically estimate changes in the overall characteristics of this population.

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