Homeless Gap Analysis: Defining Homelessness

- The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides a homeless definition that is used by all homeless service providers that accept HUD funding.
- Throughout the Homeless Gap project a common theme emerged that there is a gap in philosophy regarding how to help the homeless.
- Differences in philosophy can be seen even from the various ways people choose to define homelessness.

**Methods**

Researchers asked two questions in the Gap Analysis survey regarding how homelessness should be defined:
- “How do you define homelessness?” (Open Response)
- “Do you think the definition of homelessness is most effective when it is defined narrowly or when it is defined more broadly?” (Scale 1-5)
- Content Analysis was used to aggregate the open responses into 8 non-exclusive categories.

**References**


**Results**

- Homelessness is more than an individual
  - “A person (family) that is not housing stable...”
- Not having a physical address
  - “Anyone not having a physical address”
- Unstable, temporary, or transitional accommodations
  - “An individual who has no shelter or who is couch surfing or staying with family, using hospital for a place to stay the night.”
- Unsafe, unprotected, or uninhabitable conditions
  - “Homelessness is the lack of shelter. Living in inhabitable conditions that are unsafe, risk to health and safety of individual”
- Lack of ownership, private space
  - “If it is not “their” housing with their name or parent’s name on the lease or mortgage I consider them homeless.”
- Regulation, government, or policy-driven
  - “I refer to HUD definition...”
- Not having a place to store stuff or perform personal tasks
  - “Homelessness is when individual doesn’t have a place to keep belonging and a key to a door.”
- Not having a place to stay
  - “An individual who has no shelter or who is couch surfing or staying with family, using hospital for a place to stay the night.”

**Conclusions**

The data are supportive of a broad definition in order to effectively serve the homeless population.

Local leaders may not have the ability to alter the federal HUD definition, however local leaders may still tailor non-HUD resources toward local needs based on how the community defines homelessness.

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