

Collecting Data on the Criminalization of Youth Experiencing Homelessness: A Resource for Service Providers

This guide offers strategies for ethically collecting and using data to understand the effects of criminalization on youth experiencing homelessness and inform community-driven alternatives.

What do we mean by “criminalization?”

There are a number of ways that youth are criminalized in this country. Status offenses are one example of this. We don't tell adults what time they should or shouldn't be outside or driving home, but we do for youth.

There are also a number of ways that people experiencing homelessness in the US are criminalized. And laws that enact this have been upheld at the highest level - the Supreme Court. People experiencing homelessness are being fined, arrested and jailed across the country for existing.

Youth experiencing homelessness exist at this intersection, which makes their experiences of criminalization unique. And when we add in other characteristics, such as documentation status or race or gender identity, youth experience a number of forms of criminalization from a variety of sources, including ICE, police, probation officers, school resource officers, and more. This makes it very difficult to safely serve and support youth experiencing homelessness.

Why would we collect data about this?

One of the things about criminalization that maintains its hold and power is keeping people and local communities inwardly focused or in isolation. The more we can look up and around, seeing that this is happening across communities, the more we can build power to push back

on it and share strategies to reduce its harm on the young people we serve. Data is information. It can be in the form of numbers or counts. It can also be in the form of stories or anecdotes. We often think about data collection as a way to report on or monitor our agency's work, or to better understand who we are serving to inform how best to meet their needs. Another purpose for data collection is to show patterns of events or activity across time and/or place. This goal helps us to plan and prepare across communities and the nation in a way that is informed by evidence. As we know, however, there are risks to collecting data without putting thought and intention into the ethics of what and how it is collected, how it is stored, and how it is shared/used. Below we offer some tips and strategies to consider how to collect data more safely. When done with care and caution, there are opportunities that collecting data on criminalization can open up. For example, some providers have been able to leverage additional funding in their communities to serve those impacted by criminalization.

Strategies for collecting, storing and sharing data on the criminalization of youth experiencing homelessness

- Consider collecting data that provides insight into experiences, like qualitative data or stories/anecdotes. While we want to know how many youth are being impacted by criminalization, that doesn't give us much information on how criminalization is happening and with what results. More detailed stories about the mechanisms of criminalization and how both providers and youth are responding can help us envision strategies to be responsive and supportive. This kind of data can also help providers be prepared for mechanisms of criminalization that may not be present in their communities yet, but could be in the future.
 - For example, early in 2025 shelter providers and drop-in centers were confronted with the reality of immigration enforcement entering their spaces in ways that they had not experienced before. We watched in real time as communities where this had previously been navigated were able to share their resources (agency policies and protocols) and staff training materials with communities who had not been faced with this threat previously.
- The data doesn't always need to come directly from youth. Direct service providers are powerful sources of data. Providers can document their own stories about what they are seeing and how they are responding (both effectively and ineffectively) as a source of sharing and learning.

- Example: My locality passed this criminalizing ordinance and I learned it had this unexpected effect on youth. If I had known that before, I could have advocated for xyz to be changed/added to the ordinance or for provider agencies to be prepared in xyz ways.

Important considerations for data collection:

- Deidentify, deidentify, deidentify. Consider: could someone in my community figure out who this is with the information I have here? Prioritize a youth's privacy over the goals of data collection.
 - One way to address this is to aggregate or provide a summary of identity descriptors of people who you have collected data from, separating their identities from their responses and from other identity markers.
- You don't need fancy or expensive software to collect your data. An Excel spreadsheet or a Word document can work just fine.
- Are there data points in your regular data collection systems that could be useful to use to understand criminalization, even if they weren't originally collected for this purpose? Sometimes we already have data that can give us insight into what is happening. This can be as simple as looking at sudden or dramatic reductions in certain populations of youth presenting for services. What might this be telling us? How can we ask further questions to understand what is happening?
- Time is less of a factor when collecting data for advocacy. If you find out later that a client had a criminalizing experience, that is still worth documenting! Often we don't know what has happened with young people we are serving until they are able to return and tell us.

Important considerations for data storage:

- Consider the risks of storing data on cloud-based platforms. Systems that use protections like two-factor authentication or password protection are best.

Important considerations for data sharing and data-informed action:

- Get informed consent from a young person. Include what data and stories you will share, how you will share it, where it will be shared, for how long, etc. Tell the young person why you are doing this. You can have this information in writing so that a young person can review it. They may even want to take it with them and think about it. Always give them the option to change their mind and pull back their story or data from use.

- If sharing data in email, use an encryption tool to ensure it can only be opened by the intended receiver.
- As you think about sharing data summaries with people or organizations in your community, get really clear about the intentions of the person you are sharing with. Data can be weaponized. Have conversations within your agency and local community network of providers about protocol for sharing data with media, including when and how to set clear boundaries. Media representatives often engage in urgency-based requests. That does not mean that you have to move from a place of urgency.
- Think about the larger narrative you are shaping or contributing to when sharing data on the criminalization of youth experiencing homelessness. How can you ensure that your story places responsibility on structures and systems rather than individual young people? Check out [this resource](#) to learn more about systems storytelling.

Resources

- [Policy Solutions](#) | Housing Not Handcuffs
- Quantitative data
 - [Youth Confinement: The Whole Pie 2025](#) | Prison Policy Initiative
 - [Tracking the Criminalization of Homelessness](#) | Housing Not Handcuffs
 - [Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement \(EZACJRP\): 1997-2023](#) | Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention