Addressing Homelessness in California: A Collaborative Research Series

Qualitative Data and Methods

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Introduction

[Addressing Homelessness in California: A Collaborative Research Series](#) resulted from a study of the programs and systems providing homelessness services, shelter, and housing in California. The study's research team gathered and analyzed data from multiple sources, each providing a different piece of the puzzle.

Homelessness is complex, as are the systems designed to prevent and end it. People experiencing homelessness must navigate a vast and often confusing web of organizations and programs, many of which are targeted to specific populations or needs. People providing homelessness services, shelter, and housing must leverage complicated arrays of funding sources and confront staffing challenges while also supporting people in crisis. No single data source can capture this complexity.

In addition to administrative data from local homelessness programs and other quantitative data, the study's findings come from hundreds of interviews with people with lived experience of homelessness, local government administrators and staff, nonprofit service providers, and other stakeholders from local homelessness and housing organizations throughout California. This document describes who we interviewed, what information we gathered, and how we analyzed those qualitative data to arrive at our qualitative findings.

Interviews with Homelessness System Stakeholders

The research team conducted 234 interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders in local homelessness systems across California (see Figure 1) to understand the kinds of programs they operate, the resources those programs have and need, and how these programs work in concert. Interviews were conducted in April through August 2022.

Figure 1. Number of stakeholder interviews by type

Type of Stakeholder	Number of Interviews
Direct Service Provider	100
County Government	53
CoC Coordinating Body (other than local government)	25
City Government	20
Public Housing Agency	13
Housing Developer	8
Philanthropy	5
Other	10
Total	**234**

The assessment prioritized interviews with key administrators and staff of local governments (cities, counties, tribes) and their relevant departments (any departments or agencies dedicated to homelessness, social services/welfare departments, etc.), as well as staff from the lead agencies of Continuums of Care (CoCs). Interviewees also included direct service providers (interim and permanent supportive housing operators, outreach workers, etc.), administrators and staff at local housing authorities, and key members of health systems and philanthropic organizations working to address homelessness.

The research team developed a module-based interview guide with suggested questions for stakeholders in different roles. For any given stakeholder, interviewers selected relevant questions from this list and tailored them as needed to the stakeholders' specific position and expertise. Topics included the roles and responsibilities of entities within the local homelessness system, coordination efforts between those entities, planning and implementation of state funding programs, connections between the homelessness system and mainstream safety net programs, coordination with the healthcare sector, and racial equity. The guide included questions about different types of interventions for people experiencing or at-risk of homelessness, including prevention, outreach, shelters and interim housing, and permanent housing. The interview guide also included questions about supports and challenges among specific sub-populations, including youth, seniors, and people leaving correctional institutions.

The assessment included interviews with stakeholders in all regions of the state (see Figure 2). The research team used CoCs as the primary geography for qualitative data collection. We endeavored to interview stakeholders in all 44 CoCs in California and were able to complete interviews in 32 CoCs. The study included more interviews in CoCs with higher levels of homelessness based on the 2019 Point-in-Time Counts. However, we also selected four geographically diverse CoCs for the most extensive data collection: Alameda County, Humboldt County, Los Angeles City & County, and Sacramento City & County.

The research team reviewed public documents and other background information on each of the state's 44 CoCs to identify key stakeholders. The research team invited these stakeholders for interviews by email. The team collected email addresses from a variety of online sources, including government and CoC websites and publicly available documents (such as strategic plans, funding applications, and meeting minutes).

The research team also used a snowball sampling approach, where interviewees were asked (typically at the end of each interview) for referrals to other potential interviewees. In total, the research team sent interview invitations to 512 stakeholders across the state. Interviews were generally conducted remotely (by Zoom or phone), audio recorded (with consent), and transcribed.

Figure 2. Number of stakeholder interviews by region

Region	Number of Interviews
Southern California Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, Ventura Counties	76
Bay Area Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, Sonoma Counties	58
North State Butte, Colusa, Del Norte, Glenn, Humboldt, Lake, Lassen, Mendocino, Modoc, Nevada, Plumas, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Tehama, Trinity Counties	26
San Joaquin Valley Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Tulare Counties	25
Greater Sacramento El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento, Sutter, Yolo, Yuba Counties	22
Central Coast Monterey, San Benito, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz Counties	18
Sierras Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Inyo, Mariposa, Mono, Tuolumne Counties	1
State-wide or multiple regions	8
Total	**234**

Note: The regions above are defined by the Department of Housing and Community Development, except the San Diego region is combined with Southern California.

Interviews with People with Lived Experience of Homelessness

The assessment included interviews with 83 people with lived experience of homelessness to understand the barriers that people face in seeking assistance to exit homelessness, as well as the pathways that allowed them to move back into housing successfully. The research team recruited people with lived experience of homelessness primarily through venue-based sampling in geographically diverse parts of the state (see Figure 3) in June through August 2022. In coordination with direct service providers, the research team conducted interviews on-site at drop-in centers, interim housing programs, and permanent supportive housing sites. The research team also accompanied street outreach teams to conduct interviews with people in unsheltered locations. In addition, service provider partners offered a few interview referrals to individuals serving on lived experience advisory boards for the local CoC. These recruitment strategies yielded an interview sample with diverse housing situations and current experiences of homelessness (see Figure 4). Interviewees were also diverse in terms of age, gender, race/ethnicity, and veteran status (see Figure 5).

Figure 3. Number of interviews with people with lived experience of homelessness by region

Region	Number of Interviews
Bay Area	39
Southern California	19
Greater Sacramento	12
San Joaquin Valley	8
North State	5
Total	**83**

Figure 4. Number of interviews with people with lived experience of homelessness by current living situation and current length of homelessness at the time of the interview.

Current Living Situation	Number of Interviews	Length of Current Homelessness	Number of Interviews
Street	24	Currently housed	11
Shelter or Transitional Housing	19	Less than 6 months	10
Vehicle	14	6 months to 1 year	9
Tent / Encampment	9	1–3 years	10
Permanent Supportive Housing	8	3–5 years	13
Unstably Housed	6	more than 5 years	23
Stably Housed	3	Unknown	11

Figure 5. Number of interviews with people with lived experience of homelessness by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and veteran status.

Age	Number of Interviews	Race/Ethnicity	Number of Interviews
20–24	1	White	35
25–34	6	Black	28
35–44	12	Hispanic or Latino/a/x	10
45–54	15	American Indian or Indigenous	6
55–64	33	Multiracial	4
65+	16		
Gender		**Veteran**	
Women	40	Non-Veteran	72
Men	41	Veteran	10
Unknown	2	Unknown	1

The research team developed a module-based interview guide that was adapted to interviewees' specific circumstances. Interviews focused primarily on people's experiences with homelessness programs. Topics included experiences with different types of interventions (drop-in centers, shelters, engagement with outreach workers, etc.), strategies for learning about and navigating local services, connections to supportive people and resources, barriers to accessing housing, and recommendations for how homelessness programs could serve people better. Interviews were anonymous, and all interviewees will be thanked for their time and participation with a $50 gift card. All interviews were audio recorded if consent was given and transcribed.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The research team used qualitative data analysis software (Dedoose) to systematically review the study's large volume of interview data. The team iteratively developed a set of 91 codes for identifying interview content relevant to different experiences of homelessness and services, shelter, and housing (e.g., "unsheltered homelessness," "shelter/interim housing," "funding"). Over several rounds, multiple research team members independently coded data from the same sample of interviews, then collaboratively refined the definitions for these codes and developed new codes (e.g., "capacity," "housing affordability").

Several members of the research team then coded the full set of qualitative interview data. Where possible, interviews were coded by the person who conducted and/or transcribed the interview from the audio recording. Coders participated in two training sessions and multiple coding exercises. These exercises included independent coding of the same interviews, as well as independent coding of different interviews. Following independent coding, the research team met to discuss code definitions and decisions, promoting consistent understanding of the codes and coding process. Finally, the research team met at least weekly throughout the coding process to assess the team's coding progress, maintain common understandings of the codes and their applications, and discuss refinements to the code definitions and potentially relevant new codes.

To arrive at key findings, the research team wrote a series of memos on selected topics (e.g., "street outreach," "permanent housing") and on homelessness system organization in selected geographies (e.g., Los Angeles, Sacramento). These memos were based on a review of all excerpts from interview transcripts marked with a given set of codes. Memo writers searched for recurring patterns as well as notable deviations to describe perspectives from both stakeholders and people with lived experience of homelessness on different facets of homelessness programs and systems across California.