



POLICY SPOTLIGHT | JUNE 8, 2023

Addressing Barriers to Homelessness Data in Illinois



UNIVERSITY
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SYSTEM

INSTITUTE OF GOVERNMENT
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While long-term trends in homelessness rates have been in decline, rates started to increase in 2015.¹ In Illinois, Governor JB Pritzker signed an executive order in 2021 establishing an Interagency Task Force on Homelessness with the goal of achieving Functional Zero homelessness state-wide. In

June 2022, the Task Force released the *Home Illinois, Illinois' Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*² that sets the foundational vision to realize the goal of making homelessness rare, brief, and one-time.

One of the major hurdles state governments face in addressing homelessness is a lack of current and accurate data reporting. This is not because the data do not exist—some exist—but more so because the data are not shared well or even formatted in a way that facilitates sharing. Much of the relevant data are collected and maintained by local organizations known as Continuums of Care (CoCs) who are only mandated to report data to the US Department of Housing and

Urban Development (HUD). A lack of current and consistently reported data hinders a state government's ability to use its legislative and administrative tools to address the issue of homelessness. Recognizing this challenge, the Illinois Office to Prevent & End Homelessness (IOPEH) committed to exploring the feasibility of a statewide homelessness data reporting system in the *Home Illinois Plan*.³

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This spotlight aims to inform IOPEH efforts by looking at the State of California's efforts to integrate its 44 Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) into one Homelessness Data Integration System, centralizing homelessness data reporting and allowing its government to work towards eliminating homelessness. We note that the following steps will be necessary for Illinois to develop its own integrated system:

- Establish data sharing agreements with CoCs;
- Establish standard reporting guidelines;
- Work with the Illinois Department of Innovation and Technology (DoIT) on data governance and management procedures;
- Explore public and private sector partnership possibilities on data deduplication; and
- Establish reporting cadence wherein HMIS reports are sent to the state and published on a dashboard or open portal for public consumption.

INTRODUCTION

In late 2021, Governor JB Pritzker made a commitment to comprehensively address homelessness in Illinois by issuing executive order 2021-21. This executive order established the Illinois Inter-agency Task Force on Homelessness (IITF) which is tasked with coordinating the administration's efforts to decrease homelessness, reduce unnecessary institutionalization across the state, and achieve "functional zero" homelessness in the State of Illinois.⁴ Functional zero homelessness is a framework for communities seeking to address homelessness. It has four criteria: 1.) homelessness exits are above the number of homeless individuals in the community; 2.) the community is keeping a full account of homelessness throughout the year; 3.) the systems designed to address homelessness focus on addressing disparity, with a focus on racial and ethnic equity; and 4.) the previous 3 criteria are sustained over the long term.⁵ Illinois does have a success story for a community reaching functional zero homelessness: Rockford, Illinois, achieved the milestone in May 2017.⁶

Shortly after the IITF was established, a group of scholars and researchers affiliated with the Institute of Government & Public Affairs from across the University of Illinois System began working with the Task Force to provide data and analysis

Over the course of analyzing data for these reports it became apparent that the task of addressing homelessness at the state level requires a system to track homelessness throughout the year; and that to do so would require the state to address the barriers to collecting and managing this data in order to effectively and efficiently achieve functional zero homelessness in Illinois.



to inform the Task Force on the current and ongoing state of homelessness in Illinois, culminating

in the release of the *Home Illinois* Plan. Our scholars, researchers, and subject matter experts knew that data that would be useful for providing a full and current account of homelessness across the state did not exist. Only the yearly Point-in-Time (PIT) count, a federally mandated reporting requirement, was available for the initial reports. Over the course of analyzing data for these reports it became apparent that the task of addressing homelessness at the state level requires a system to track homelessness throughout the year; and that to do so would require the state to address the barriers to collecting and managing this data in order to effectively and efficiently achieve functional zero homelessness in Illinois. This policy spotlight describes HMIS systems, discusses the challenges in creating and implementing a

statewide homelessness data reporting system, and highlights the state of California's effort to centralize its HMIS data and the opportunities realized by implementing its Homeless Data Integration System (HDIS).

HOMELESSNESS DATA IN ILLINOIS

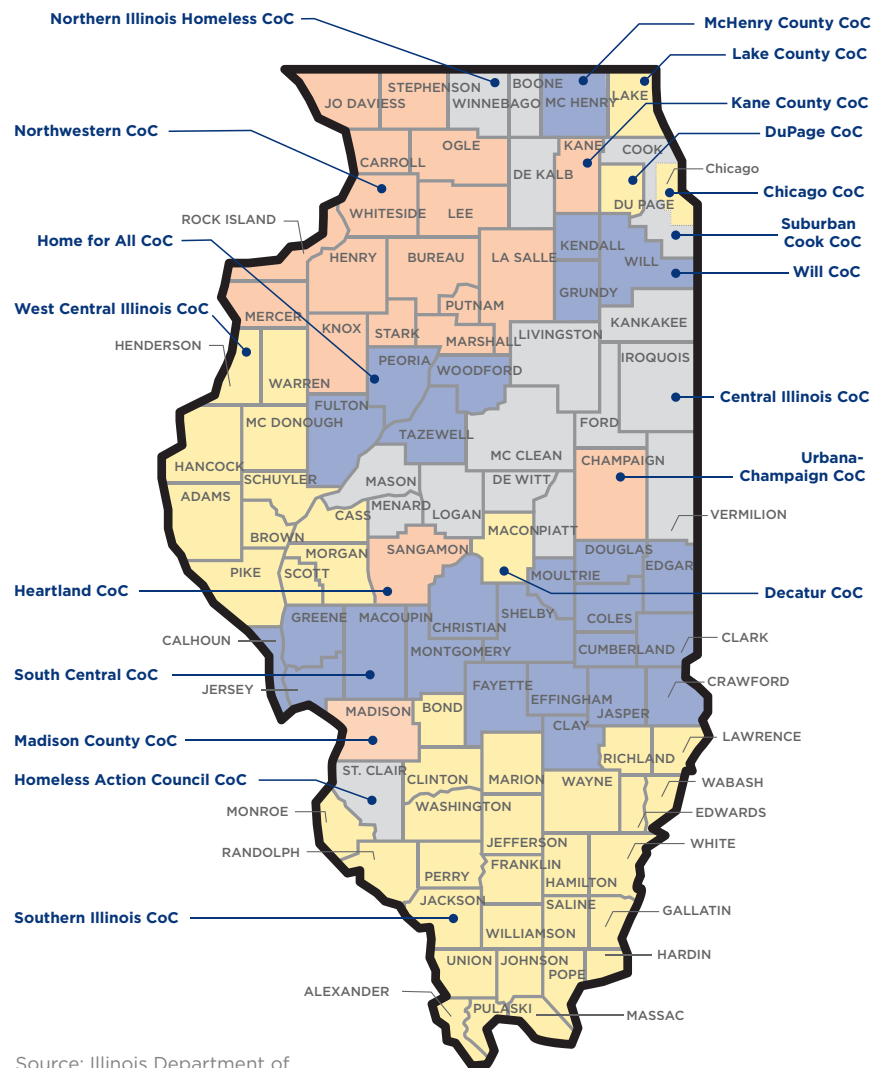
Homelessness data in Illinois are collected across 19 Continuums of Care (CoCs). A CoC is a regional or local planning organization that coordinates services to address homelessness within its geography. The US Department of Housing and Urban

Development (HUD) requires that CoCs fund programs to provide permanent housing, transitional housing, supportive services, and, in some cases, homelessness prevention. Each CoC operates its own local HMIS which they use to collect data on the provision of housing and services to homeless individuals, families, and persons at risk of homelessness. These data are collected and provided to HUD in compliance with their data collection, management, and reporting standards, allowing HUD to inform homelessness policy at the federal level.⁷

In most cases CoC boundaries map neatly to existing county boundaries. For example, the Northern Illinois Homeless CoC includes Winnebago, Boone, and DeKalb counties within its boundaries. In Illinois, the only CoC that does not map precisely to county boundary lines is the Chicago CoC, which follows the City of Chicago boundary lines. As Chicago is located entirely within Cook County, the Chicago and Suburban Cook County CoCs completely cover Cook County, and aligning county data to CoC data is thus rather easy.

State-wide programs to address homelessness require current and regularly updated data on the homeless population to succeed. Homelessness data are centralized at the federal level in the form of an annual PIT count, obtained on a designated night in January when a census of people experiencing homelessness is undertaken nationwide, employing a common protocol. There is, however, no system in place to consistently track homeless population counts or homeless service access on a sub-annual basis by state governments. This poses a challenge to state-based initiatives to address homelessness. Without regular data on service access throughout the

Figure 1. Map of Continuums of Care Across Illinois



Source: Illinois Department of Children & Family Services

year there is little data to drive state-level spending on services for the homeless. A state-wide warehouse of uniformly reported HMIS data reported on even a quarterly basis would allow for funds and programs to better target local homeless populations based on need and prevalence.⁸

Because HMIS systems operate at the CoC level and CoCs are only required to report to HUD directly, current data on

homelessness is not generally available to state governments. The onus is on the states to establish a program collecting and aggregating such data, from HUD or from the CoCs. The difficulty of such consolidation varies by state, as states differ dramatically in how they are divided into CoCs. For example, Indiana, with about half the population of Illinois, has only 2 CoCs. Illinois, which hosts 19 CoCs, faces larger administrative and technical hurdles.

HOMELESSNESS MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS

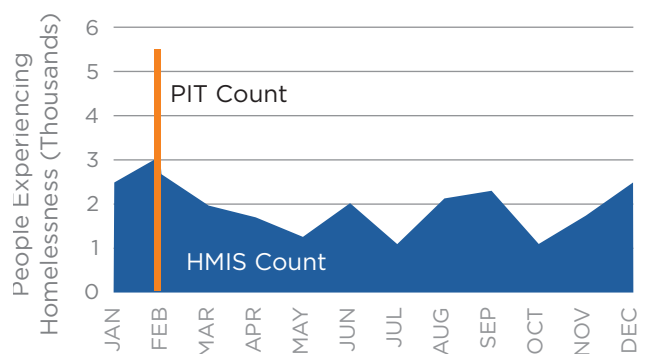
The number of CoCs within a state is based on local capacity, will, availability, and funding, as CoCs are created by local organizations, nonprofits, and governments.⁹ Each CoC maintains and organizes its own HMIS. It is not uncommon for a CoC to utilize third-party vendors to operate and maintain its HMIS. Using third-party IT solutions allows CoCs to focus their resources on providing case management and services, but this outsourcing can complicate the negotiation of data sharing agreements in situations where vendors may attempt to gain ownership of the data. It is imperative that contracts are well-thought out and optimally CoCs would retain ownership of the data.^{10, 11} Reporting HMIS data to other agencies, including HUD, can often require technical solutions as well. In the case of the City of Chicago CoC, and many other HMISs across the country, software called ServicePoint is used as a database solution while a separate software called BusinessObjects is used to generate reports for other organizations and government agencies.¹² These two software solutions are provided by separate vendors. Most vendors are capable of exporting and importing HUD data to facilitate data migration when necessary, though each HMIS can have its own idiosyncrasies and technicalities around implementation of HUD reporting standards.

CoCs designate an administrator for their HMIS. The City of Chicago CoC is administered by an organization called All Chicago, a non-profit focused on addressing and ending homelessness.¹³ The Suburban Cook CoC, which manages the HMIS for the area of Cook County that falls outside of Chicago, is administered by Alliance to End Homelessness in Suburban Cook County.¹⁴ They also utilize ServicePoint as their HMIS database solution along with several other CoCs in Illinois.

HUD uses the framework of Data Maturity to support CoCs in assessing their data quality standards, analytics capacity, use of data in leading policy and process development, and IT system needs. HMIS systems have different levels of Data Maturity even within the same state due to differences in staffing, institutional capacity, and staff skills.¹⁵ Because of this, data quality between HMISs can vary, making reported numbers across CoCs difficult to compare. HUD's HMIS reporting requirements are also variable year-over-year, leading to difficulties in tracking sub-populations of homeless families and individuals in a consistent manner.^{16, 17} As an example, one of the most recent changes was to categories for questions surrounding age.¹⁸



Figure 2. Reported HMIS data in most cases across Illinois describes numbers of people accessing homeless services, including shelters, throughout the year. This differs from the PIT count, which tallies people experiencing street and shelter homelessness on a designated night of the year as mandated by HUD.



The PIT Count is based on a single night in January. In this example, a count of 5,500 people.

HMIS Count of accessing services is based on encounters over an entire year. In this example, a count of 23,000 people.

Source: David Mendieta and Samuel Carlson, "Estimate of Homeless People in Chicago (2015-19)" (2021), Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, https://s6624.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Homeless-Estimate-2021_FINAL.pdf

Reported HMIS data in most cases across Illinois describes numbers of people accessing homeless services, including shelters, throughout the year. This differs from the PIT count, which tallies people experiencing street and shelter homelessness on a designated night of the year as mandated by HUD.¹⁹ While HMIS data are incorporated as part of the sheltered portion of the PIT report, these are distinct methods of quantifying homelessness. The mismatch between reported PIT counts and

HMIS reports stems from a different baseline of how the data are collected, so it is important to be able to use both sets of data cohesively. The City of Chicago CoC illustrates this. While the PIT counts enumerated between 5,290 and 6,786 people experiencing homelessness on the designated January nights between 2015 to 2019, HMIS data for Chicago indicates that the number of people accessing homeless services across each year from 2015 to 2019 ranged between 21,919 and 23,808 people.²⁰

A robust HMIS system that captures people experiencing homelessness and interacting with services throughout the year can augment the one-night snapshot of PIT counts, providing a more holistic picture of homelessness.

HMIS data also do not include people living on the street or other places not meant for habitation who had no contact with service providers, whereas the PIT count does have that data. HMIS data also do not include people experiencing homelessness who do not want to be found because of the potential negative impact to their safety and wellbeing, such as those involved in sex work and or those without documentation of citizenship or immigration. However, PIT count does have the ability to capture those individuals based on where they are located on the designated PIT count evening in January.

HMIS administrators are aware of the challenges with their data and are actively making strides to improve their systems. Returning to the City of Chicago CoC, the non-profit organization All Chicago has managed the city-wide HMIS system

since 2012.²¹ In 2019, All Chicago conducted a nationwide review of other HMIS administrators to identify solutions enhancing data sharing, especially with health and human services systems.²² Building on this review, Chicago has participated in a pilot program to share homelessness data from HMIS with hospital systems' electronic health records to improve care.²³ A robust HMIS system that captures people experiencing homelessness and interacting with services throughout the year can augment the one-night snapshot of

PIT counts, providing a more holistic picture of homelessness.²⁴

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Attaining functional zero homelessness in Illinois will require, at minimum, a system to track progress towards that goal. That system would require a coordinated effort across HMIS providers, state, and local governments to centralize and track data. It is only through the collection and maintenance of HMIS data at the state level that functional zero will be achievable statewide. This section discusses the challenges and opportunities associated with the development of a centralized state HMIS database.

The Illinois Department of Human Services provides services or serves as a connector,



depending on the service needed, to both those currently homeless and those at risk of becoming homeless.²⁵ It does not have a system set up to actively collect and maintain data on homelessness outside of the yearly counts provided by HUD utilizing local HMIS reports.²⁶ Tracking progress on homelessness prevention is limited without a frequent and current count of homelessness in the state. While a yearly count provides useful data, there are methodological limitations in its count that exaggerate the proportion of the population experiencing chronic homelessness while likely undercounting the total homeless population.²⁷ Creating and maintaining a centralized data warehouse of local HMIS products would provide opportunities to better allocate funding and develop more strategic programming around homelessness prevention at the state level.

Centralizing these data requires creating a standard reporting structure, timeline, and training for data reporters. Local HMIS databases vary in data quality and coordinating a new reporting system would be no small task. Data-sharing agreements would need to be created between the State of Illinois and each CoC. Funding and support for the activities required in standardizing and reporting HMIS data would have to be provided to ensure a successful implantation. However, with the expanded efforts within Illinois state government to mitigate homelessness, there is ample opportunity right now to utilize resources to improve homelessness data. Additionally, there are movements at both the local and state level to improve data sharing and access across agencies in the state, so this is an issue with salience.²⁸

Even after data-sharing agreements are created, there are further technical challenges. A state-wide homelessness data warehouse capturing counts from multiple CoCs runs the risk of double-counting families and individuals who move from one CoC to another and access services. CoCs also vary widely in terms of which measures of homeless are counted. By nature of its data sources (CoC HMIS reports), a state-wide data

warehouse would only be counting homeless populations that access services through CoCs. It would necessarily not capture unsheltered homeless populations and those that do not access services. While this gap poses a limitation in getting an accurate count of state-wide homelessness, it also demonstrates the ongoing usefulness of the annual PIT count.

A centralized HMIS system would not replace the annual PIT count but instead would serve as a supplement. The annual PIT count is currently the only routine collection of data on both sheltered and unsheltered homelessness. Each year, CoCs are mandated to perform a survey of homeless populations within their boundaries to collect information on total counts of sheltered, unsheltered, and chronic homelessness. This survey also collects counts of sub-populations including veterans, youths, people suffering from substance abuse and mental illness, and racial groups. HMIS also collects sub-population data, and increasing the frequency of reporting would allow for better programmatic targeting of funds to address local needs.



CASE STUDY: CALIFORNIA

Illinois is not the first state to attempt a state-wide strategy to address the issue of homelessness. In 2017, the California Interagency Council on Homelessness (Cal ICH) was created to “oversee the implementation of Housing First policies, guidelines, and regulations” to address homelessness in California.²⁹ In 2021, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed into law AB-977 and AB-1220. While homelessness continues to be a significant challenge for California, the data modernization components of these bills are trailblazing. These laws require that CoCs report universal elements to the Homeless Data Integration System (HDIS), and that a state-wide HMIS data warehouse be active by January 2023, respectively.³⁰ Since September 2022, the State of California has been actively working with a consultant on compliance with AB-977 and AB-1220 by the end of California Fiscal Year 2023.^{31, 32}

Cal ICH’s HDIS system consists of data reported from 44 CoCs. To ensure data quality the HDIS utilizes only HUD’s universal data elements.³³ These universal elements are consistently tracked year-over-year by all HMIS programs. Development of the HDIS involved a team of 5 state staff, \$7M allocated by the state legislature, 44 individual data use agreements (one for each CoC in the state), and technical assistance funding from HUD.³⁴ The deduplication of individuals and families across CoCs utilized systems was created by a third party in partnership with the California Department of Technology.³⁵ Deduplication of records within homelessness datasets is a critical function, especially in contexts where homeless individuals could access services across geographically separate programs (e.g. an individual accessing services in the San Francisco CoC and the adjacent Marin County CoC should only be counted once). The deduplication algorithm cost approximately \$3.5M to build out in cooperation with ABT Associates, who provided 20 staff members.³⁶ Maintenance of the system costs approximately \$800K annually and has a 4-month lag to ensure quality of data and that personally identifiable information is protected.³⁷

California is home to the largest counted population of people experiencing homelessness in the country³⁸ and faces ongoing scrutiny in its efforts to address homelessness.^{39, 40, 41} HDIS data are displayed on a dashboard on the Cal ICH website, allowing residents, policymakers, and service providers to track trends at the CoC-level across the state. See figures 3, 4, and 5 which provide

examples of data available on the California HDIS dashboard. The public display and provision of HDIS data allows for public accountability and targeting of program funding around homelessness.⁴² The development of California’s HDIS dashboard is a step in the right direction, but there is still improvement to be made to create a data ecosystem comprehensive enough to understand the many variables together that it will take to achieve goals around homelessness. One can define the first problem as counting homeless individuals only, without also integrating information on programmatic funding allocations and frequency of programs used. Moreover, if an ideal database would include not just the counts, but information on services available and being used, it could be better to build the bigger system at the outset, rather than step by step.^{43, 44}

HDIS data is displayed on a dashboard on the Cal ICH website, allowing residents, policymakers, and service providers to track trends at the CoC-level across the state.

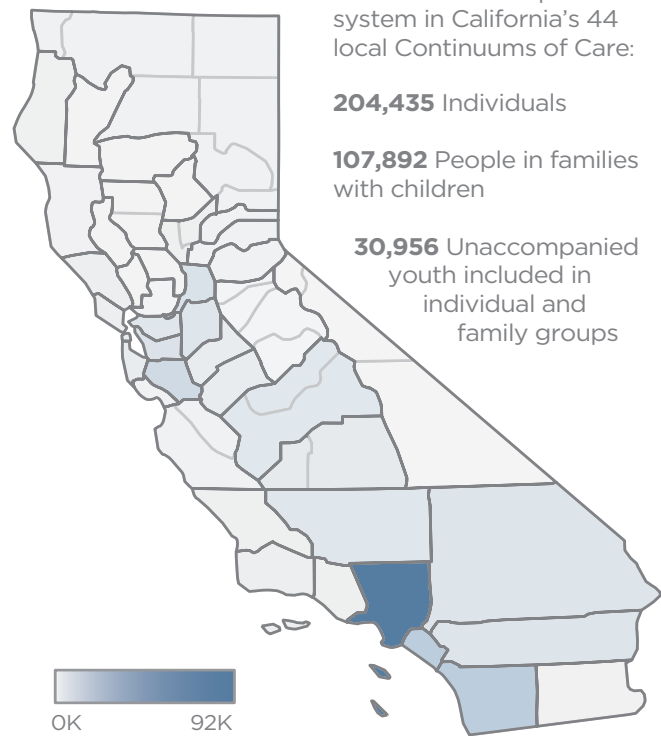
Figure 3. Californians experiencing homelessness, by CoC and number of individuals served. The State of Illinois plans to explore the possibility of a similar statewide HMIS system and dashboard.⁴⁵

In 2022, **316,434** people accessed the homelessness response system in California’s 44 local Continuums of Care:

204,435 Individuals

107,892 People in families with children

30,956 Unaccompanied youth included in individual and family groups



Source: “Homeless Data Integration System,” State of California, Business, Consumer Services and Housing Agency, <https://bcsh.ca.gov/calich/hdis.html>.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REDUCING BARRIERS TO HOMELESSNESS DATA

As Illinois begins its work to achieve functional zero homelessness, it will be necessary to create and maintain a data warehouse to track changes in the homeless population. California provides a useful example of a centralized state-level HMIS reporting system with their Homeless Data Integration System.⁴⁶ Illinois has already taken the very first step to follow a similar path, which is to establish in writing, in the recently published *Home Illinois, Illinois' Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* report, the intent to explore a centralized state-level HMIS system. Illinois can follow California's lead by doing the following:

- Establish data sharing agreements with CoCs across the state;
- Establish standard reporting guidelines;
- Work with the Illinois Department of Innovation and Technology on data governance and management procedures;
- Explore public and private sector partnership possibilities on data deduplication procedures; and
- Establish reporting cadence in which HMIS reports are sent to the state and published on a dashboard or open portal for public consumption.

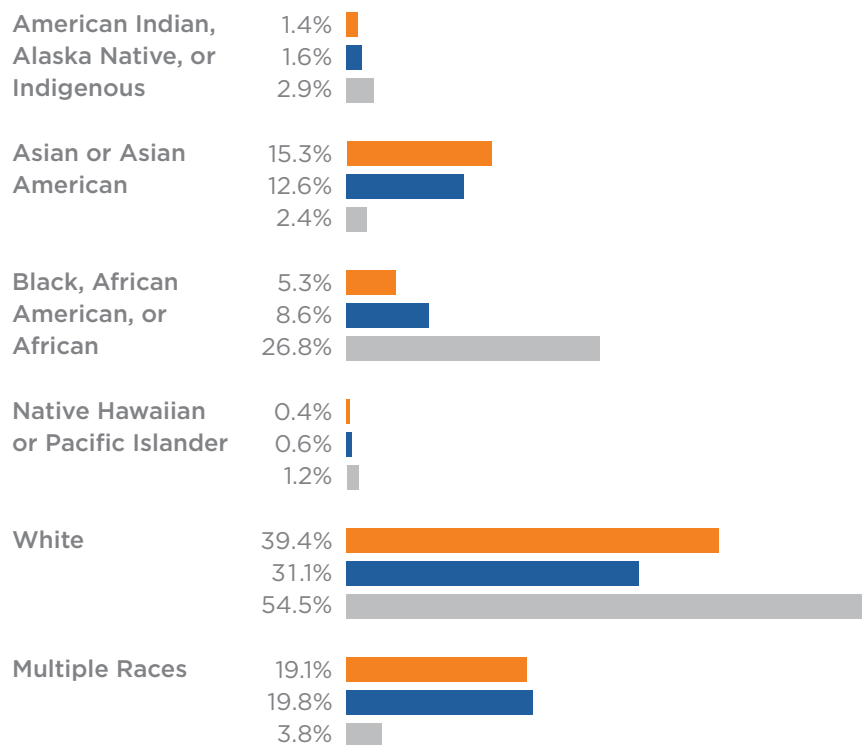
California's HDIS provides a framework for Illinois to follow, though there will likely be differences in funding and operations between the two states. While California's project is still currently in development, the promise of using a state-wide system to track homelessness and better direct programs and services is clear. Reducing homelessness state-wide will require good programs guided



Figure 4. Racial breakdown of homelessness in California, year 2021 (most recent data). Illinois could use its own dashboard to illustrate patterns of homelessness. The data could be used to inform policy decisions and financial allocations.

■ % of general population
■ % of people living below poverty level
■ % of people experiencing homelessness

Race



Ethnicity



Source: "Homeless Data Integration System," State of California, Business, Consumer Services and Housing Agency, <https://bcsh.ca.gov/calich/hdis.html>.

by good data. By implementing the infrastructure necessary to collect and track this data, Illinois can better position itself to accurately and effectively achieve functional zero homelessness.

Reducing homelessness state-wide will require good programs guided by good data. By implementing the infrastructure necessary to collect and track this data, Illinois can better position itself to accurately and effectively achieve functional zero homelessness.



Figure 5. Demographic characteristics of people experiencing homelessness, served by California in 2022. Illinois could use its own dashboard to illustrate patterns of homelessness. The data could be used to inform policy decisions and financial allocations.

In 2022, within the California homelessness response system the **316,434** people experiencing homelessness reflected the following characteristics:

Race

White	175,487	
Black, African American, or African American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous	85,668	
Multiple Races	13,297	
American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous	10,553	
Asian or Asian American	6,046	
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	3,953	

Ethnicity

Not Hispanic/Latinx	188,672	
Hispanic/Latinx	115,622	

Gender

Male	175,197	
Female	133,271	
Unknown	5,538	
Transgender	1,534	
Non-Singular Gender	841	
Questioning Gender	53	

Age

Under 18	67,913	
18-24	25,046	
24-34	54,477	
35-44	55,839	
45-54	46,531	
55-64	44,263	
65+	18,537	

7% Identified as veterans 17,040 of 238,725 adults	46% Reported disabling condition(s) 145,926 of 316,434 people	21% Reported as having experienced domestic violence 51,704 of 251,170
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Source: "Homeless Data Integration System," State of California, Business, Consumer Services and Housing Agency, <https://bcsh.ca.gov/calich/hdis.html>.

ENDNOTES

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(Endnotes continued on next page)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Publisher’s Note

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Mast Photographs

Chicago cityscape - Elena Sivitskaia, stock.adobe.com
Illinois State Capitol Dome - Frame from video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2wPy7DfXfQ>
Capitol Dome at Dusk - Frame from Adobe Stock video file 187821651, by VIA Films

Photography from istockphoto.com

Pg. 1 - Seated homeless man, #1265144216 by urbazon
Pg. 2 - Data concept, #1189498986 by dem10
Pg. 4 - Homeless man with cart, #458726339 by chapin31
Pg. 5 - Shared electronic data, #1371201058 by Maxxa Satori
Pg. 6 - Homeless shelter, #1395923194, by shironosov
Pg. 6 - Networked data, #1383963898, by Outflow Designs
Pg. 7 - California counties map, #902493074, by rbiedermann
Pg. 8 - Technology and Data, #1408832606, by Urupong
Pg. 9 - Shelter for mother and daughter, #1395914400, by shironosov