

Waiving Barriers for the Homeless to Obtain Independent Housing

Descriptive Secondary Data Analysis

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Importance of Research Project

In a 2014 NPR article, Joseph Shapiro outlines some of the things defendants are billed for which causes their court fees to be expensive. He cites research from a yearlong NPR study that found in 43 states, defendants can be billed for a public defender, in 41 states, inmates are charged room and board for jail and prison stays, and in 44 states, offenders can get billed for probation and parole supervision (Shapiro, 2014). Defendants have to pay for their own arrest warrants, drug and alcohol assessments, to have their DNA sampled and to pay for the cost of a jury. Court fees can be barriers to goals such as obtaining independent housing and reinstating a client's driver's license. Specifically, homeless individuals struggle the most. Two local law offices in Knoxville, Tennessee have partnered together to assist applicants who identify as homeless and who have a caseworker in the community in the process of waiving or partially waiving court fees. The goal of this type of program is to reduce barriers for this vulnerable population and assist them in obtaining independent stable housing. Not much research and contact has happened to monitor this population after they go through the process.

Research Question(s)/Hypothesis

There were two questions I addressed in my research project. I chose to focus on the percentage of homeless persons who obtained independent housing because the goal of waiving court fees is to assist homeless persons with obtaining independent housing and I wanted to focus on the effectiveness of that strategy. I chose to focus on the percentage of individuals who had their courts fees waived who obtained a driver's license because court fees that prevented persons from obtaining their driver's licenses were typically the court fees that were waived according to my observations of the interviewing process for the program. These are the official questions for my research project: What percentage of persons who have their court fees waived

successfully obtain a driver's license? What percentage of persons who have their court fees waived successfully get into stable housing?

I followed up with clients who went through the program from the year 2017 and determined if they have obtained housing and a driver's license through contacting their social worker. I asked the social worker to answer with information from their last contact with the client. My hypothesis is that a third of the clients have obtained independent housing by the beginning of 2020. Of those who listed driver's licenses as something to be obtained, I believe that half of the participants will have obtained their driver's license.

Sampling

The population I studied was the homeless population who went through the program offered through the two law offices. For the purposes of this program, homeless means anyone who is not living in their own apartment. It can mean someone who is couch surfing, living with a friend or family member, living in emergency shelters, or on the street. There were past applications from clients who applied and went through the program available to me at my internship placement. My task instructor is the person in charge of organizing the program. Evaluating the program falls under the umbrella of tasks I was asked to complete as an intern. I looked at data from 2017 because that year was when my task instructor first started working with this program, so the data is more neatly organized and concise. I had hope to have a sample size of 40 people, however, because of COVID-19 and not being able to return to my field placement, I was only able to contact the social workers of 12 of the past participants in 2017.

Measures

Independent Variable

In my research, I did not have an independent variable.

Dependent Variable(s)

The dependent variables were the state of housing the clients are currently in and whether or not clients obtained a driver's license. Since each participant was required to have a caseworker in the community before going through the program, I called the caseworkers of the clients instead of calling the individual clients. Even though participation in this research project does not affect if a client will have their court fees waived since court fees were waived prior to the study, I wanted to take extra measures to protect the confidentiality of the participants. I organized the applications by agencies to make this an easier process and call the social worker of multiple clients only once instead of calling them several times and wasting their time. I only asked caseworkers if they knew if participants obtained independent housing and if they obtained a driver's license. I don't need to know when or where they live now because I do not want to take away too much time from the caseworkers. The four categories participants were categorized in for housing were still homeless, a middle ground of housing such as a halfway house or transitional housing, independent housing where the client has a name on the lease, or the information is unknown because of no contact. I created a script for the phone calls I made to the agencies explaining who I am, what my project is, where it will be presented and that the answers they give was aggregated so that nothing could be traced back to the clients. A copy of the script is included at the end of this paper before the Works Cited page.

Data Analysis Methods

I completed a descriptive secondary data analysis. If 50% or more of the participants achieved independent housing then the results conclude that the program is accomplishing its goals of breaking down barriers for a vulnerable population and assisting them in acquiring

independent, stable housing. If 50% or more of the participants had also acquired a driver's license, then the program would be considered a success and accomplishing the goals of the program. If less than 50% of the participants obtained independent housing, then the goals of the program are not being met even if 50% or higher of those needing driver's licenses have now obtained them. The current housing status of participants is more weighted in this study because assisting clients with obtaining independent housing is the primary goal of the strategy of waiving court fees.

Results and Further Research Required

The results appear to show that getting court fees waived may help homeless persons obtain independent housing, but fewer were successful at obtaining their driver's licenses after their court fees were waived. Half of the participants studied were in independent housing at last contact with their social workers while 41.7% of participants' housing was unknown due to lack of contact. 41.7% of participants did not have a valid driver's license at last contact while a quarter of participants did have a valid driver's license. 33.3% of participants' driving statuses were unknown.

More research needs to be completed with a larger sample size and with a control group of participants who did not have their court fees waived in order for the research conclusions drawn from my research project to be considered valid. One concern with contacting clients who did not have their court fees waived is that it would ruin an already fragile relationship with the law offices and the client because the client was unable to receive services, in this case, get their court fees waived, and therefore, would not appreciate to have been contacted again for a research study that would still not have an direct benefit to the client. This is why I did not do a

comparative analysis with a control group of clients who did not have their court fees waived and a modified group of clients who did have their court fees waived.

Phone Script

Researcher: Hello. My name is Insert Researcher's Name and I am a social work intern at Insert Law Office. For my bachelor's degree at the College of Social Work at the University of Tennessee, I am conducting a senior research project on the Insert Program Name run by our office. As a part of this project, I would like to ask you a couple questions about a client(s) in your agency previously served by this program. The program director, Insert Program Director's Name, has given me permission to ask about this client. The information will remain protected on a computer at our office and after this conversation, all identifying information about this client will be removed so that the client is not able to be connected to this study. Would you mind if I asked a few questions about a couple of your clients who went through the program in 2017?

Social worker's response. If yes, continue on. If no, stop here.

Researcher: I am tracking the type of housing and if clients have received a driver's license since having their court fees waived in 2017. In this study, there are four categories for housing for clients. They are homeless, transitional, independent housing or unknown. Homeless includes clients who live at emergency shelters, couch surf or stay with family members. Transitional housing includes treatment facilities and sober living homes. Independent housing encompasses those who have their name on a lease. I do not need to know the specifics such as where the client is living or when they entered into that housing, just which out of the four categories the client falls into. The driver's license information is just if they have it or not. Does this sound like something you would be able to help me out with?

Social worker's response. If yes, continue on. If no, stop.

Researcher: Okay. Thank you so much. Do you have any information about the housing and/or driver's license status of _____? If not, do you know someone who would?

Social worker *hopefully gives information*

Researcher: Thank you for your assistance. The results of this project will be presented at EURECA which is an undergraduate research forum at the University of Tennessee. No identifying information will be displayed on the project, and your involvement will remain confidential. Do you have any other questions for me about me or my study?

Social worker response. No or yes.

Researcher: Thank you for your time and have a nice day.

References

Shapiro, J. (2014, May 19). As Court Fees Rise, The Poor Are Paying the Price. *NPR*. Retrieved from http://blog.wolflaw.com/articles/20150110%20As%20Court%20Fees%20Rise,%20The%20Poor%20Are%20Paying%20The%20Price%20_%20NPR.pdf