The "Conclusions" of Government Report GAO-10-702: "Homelessness: A Common Vocabulary Could Help Agencies Collaborate and Collect More Consistent Data" (2010)

For many years, the federal government has attempted to determine the extent and nature of homelessness. As part of this effort, Education, HHS, and HUD have systems in place that require service providers involved in the homelessness programs they administer to collect data on those experiencing homelessness and report these data in various ways to the agencies. However, while the data currently being collected and reported can provide some useful information on those experiencing homelessness, because of difficulties in counting this transient population and changes in methodologies over time, they are not adequate for fully understanding the extent and nature of homelessness. In addition, the data do not track family composition well or contribute to an understanding of how family formation and dissolution relate to homelessness. Further, because of serious shortcomings and methodologies that change over time, the biennial point-in-time counts have not adequately tracked changes in homelessness over time. While these data systems have improved, it still is difficult for agencies to use them to understand the full extent and nature of homelessness, and addressing their shortcomings could be costly. For example, one shortcoming of HUD's point-in-time count is that it relies on volunteer enumerators who may lack experience with the population, but training and utilizing professionals would be very costly.

In part because of data limitations, researchers have collected data on narrowly defined samples that may not be useful for understanding homelessness more generally or do not often consider structural factors, such as area poverty rates, which may be important in explaining the prevalence and causes of homelessness. In addition, because complete and accurate data that track individuals and families over time do not exist, researchers generally have not been able to explain why certain people experience homelessness and others do not, and why some are homeless for a single, short period and others have multiple episodes of homelessness or remain homeless for a long time.

However, those who have experienced or might experience homelessness frequently come in contact with mainstream programs that are collecting data about the recipients of their services. While homelessness is not the primary focus of these programs, if they routinely collected more detailed and accurate data on housing status, agencies and service providers could better assess the needs of program recipients and could use these data to help improve the government's understanding

of the extent and nature of homelessness. Researchers also could potentially use these data to better define the factors associated with becoming homeless or to better understand the path of homelessness over time. Collecting these data in existing or new systems might not be easy, and agencies would incur costs in developing questions and providing incentives for accurate data to be collected. Collecting such data may be easier for those programs that already collect some housing data on individuals, families, and youths who use the programs and report those data on an individual or aggregate basis to a federal agency, such as HHS's Substance Abuse Treatment and Prevention Block Grant program or Head Start. For those mainstream programs that do not currently report such data, collecting it may be a state or local responsibility, and the willingness of states to collect the data may vary across locations. For example, HHS has reported that about half of the states that do collect homelessness data do not consider it burdensome to do so through their TANF and Medicaid applications, and would be willing to provide data extracts to HHS for research purposes. States or localities and researchers could find these data useful even if they are not collected on a federal or national level. However, concerns exist about resource constraints and data reliability. Therefore, the benefits of collecting data on housing status for various programs would need to be weighed against the costs.

Federal efforts to determine the extent and nature of homelessness and develop effective programs to address homelessness have been hindered by the lack of a common vocabulary. For programs to collect additional data on housing status or homelessness or make the best use of that data to better understand the nature of homelessness, agencies would need to agree on a common vocabulary and terminology for these data. Not only would this common vocabulary allow agencies to collect consistent data that agencies or researchers could compile to better understand the nature of homelessness, it also would allow agencies to communicate and collaborate more effectively. As identified in 2011 budget proposals, Education, HHS, and HUD are the key agencies that would need to collaborate to address homelessness, but other agencies that also belong to the Interagency Council—a venue for federal collaborative efforts— such as DOL and DOJ might need to be involved as well. However, agency staff may find it difficult to communicate at a federal or local level when they have been using the same terms to mean different things. For example, agencies might want to avoid using the term homelessness itself because of its multiple meanings or the stigma attached to it. Instead, they might want to list a set of housing situations explicitly. The agencies could begin to consider this as part of the proceedings Congress has mandated that the Interagency Council convene after this report is issued. Once agencies have developed a common

vocabulary, they might be able to develop a common understanding of how to target services to those who are most in need and for whom services will be most effective. In addition, with a common vocabulary, local communities could more easily develop cohesive plans to address the housing needs of their communities.