

# DATA JUSTICE REPORT

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# About Us

Human service organizations and their funders have access to a large amount of personal data, so they must make sure to collect and steward this data responsibly for themselves and their participants. Since 2021, the Metropolitan Alliance of Connected Communities (MACC) Data Justice Cohort has been exploring the negative impact that data collection and distribution has on our communities and the ways the nonprofit sector and their partners can improve our practices. This report raises awareness of the potential harm that can be caused by our sector's data practices and asks others to join us in adopting more just data practices.

## Who we are

MACC is a collaborative network of [over 60 human service nonprofits](#) in Minnesota. We provide the infrastructure for the dynamic collaboration needed to disrupt oppressive systems and solve complex problems. We strengthen our members organizations through capacity-building, shared administrative services, and collective action. Our diverse membership includes food shelves, housing organizations, organizations focused on violence prevention, youth work organizations, and more.

Data staff across the MACC Data Network have long witnessed inequities resulting from nonprofit data practices. We seek to address this problem collectively. In December 2021, the Data Justice cohort was founded. This group is made up of data staff and other leaders at 15 MACC member organizations (see figure 1). After two and a half years of meeting regularly, we have created a definition of [Data Justice](#), agreed to [Data Justice Standards](#) human services organizations can adopt, trained staff at our member organizations around these principles, and presented our work to community partners.

*Data Justice is building equity into all aspects of our data practices. It's a framework for promoting data practices that uphold truth, learning, consent, and accountability. Data Justice weighs the benefits and harms of our practices so that data is entirely in service of the individuals and communities it represents.*

*[Read the full definition here.](#)*

# The MACC Data Justice Cohort

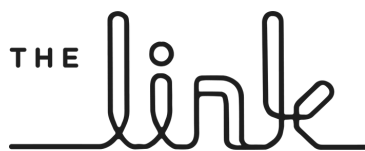
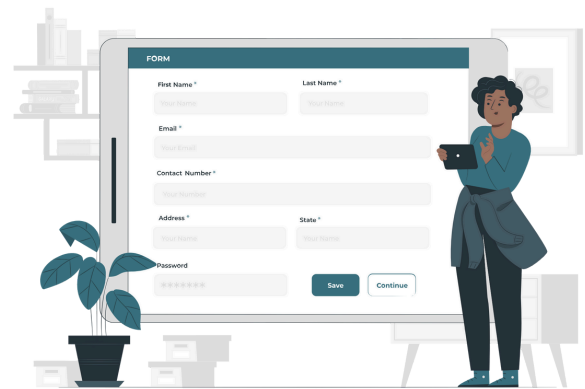


figure 1

# The Problem: Data Has Costs

While the collection of personal data has become commonplace in our society in the last decade, it is worthwhile to consider the scope and consequences of personal data collection by human service organizations.

Human service organizations provide food, shelter, employment support, domestic violence response, and more. When people seek these services, it is often because of a stressful life event or crisis. In order to access necessary services, participants have to give over their personal data. Data points collected from participants can carry an emotional burden.



The detail and intimacy of questions posed can vary, from zip code of residence, to social security number, to history of sexual violence. Data might be collected once or multiple times over the course of a participant's time in a program, with some data points accepted verbally, while others require documentation. For example, a person may have to produce a social security card, medical record, or pay stub in order to prove their eligibility for a program.



Organizations collect this data for many reasons: to support case management, to feed into program evaluation, to aid in storytelling, and, most significantly, to meet funder requirements. Funders seek data because they want the same outcomes that human service organizations do – to support their community members in improving their lives. They also seek data to ensure compliance with the stipulations of granted funds. Organizations regularly report back on the data

points required by funders about the identities, histories, and activities of people served. Continued funding is typically contingent upon these reports being completed.

Through the work with our Data Justice Cohort, we've identified costs of common data practices in the human service ecosystem and where the impact lands:

Costs	Who pays the cost
<p><b>Barriers to service access</b> Some individuals choose not to access needed services if the cost is their personal data. It is often unclear which specific data points are required in order to participate, if any, so this decision is made in the dark.</p>	<p>Participants Nonprofits Fundors</p>
<p><b>Burden on staff time and resources</b> Community organizations are often not meaningfully funded to collect or manage the amount of data they are expected to. Time and money spent on data is time and money not spent on direct service.</p>	<p>Nonprofits Participants</p>
<p><b>External decision-makers' outsized impact on program design</b> Organizations might modify good programs to fit external measures of success determined by (sometimes multiple) funding sources.</p>	<p>Nonprofits Participants</p>
<p><b>Invasion of privacy and the potential to retraumatize</b> Data required for program participation can be incredibly sensitive and invasive. The emotional toll can grow if the data has an unclear case management purpose or destination.</p>	<p>Participants</p>
<p><b>Risk of data breach</b> The more data an organization collects, the more potential there is for harm if the data is hacked or leaked. The potential harm includes theft of participants' identities and irreparably damaging a community's trust with an organization they feel has mismanaged people's data.</p>	<p>Nonprofits Participants</p>
<p><b>Underfunded Evaluation</b> When an organization's data efforts are dedicated to funding compliance, fewer resources are available for meaningful program evaluation.</p>	<p>Participants Nonprofits Fundors</p>

When our human services organizations spend time, energy, and resources meeting data requirements that don't directly help provide services to community members, we all lose out. This dynamic contributes to staff burnout and can prevent organizations from serving more people or improving programs. The burden most directly falls on participants. It also weighs on organizations and funders, as well as negatively impacting communities at large.

The need for these services is not going away anytime soon. In 2022, more than 432,337 Minnesotans received monthly SNAP assistance ([MN DHS](#)) and around 130,000 needed housing assistance to catch up on late payments in 2022-2023 ([MHFA](#)). When people in need must trade data for these and other needed services, they are paying a data tax that disproportionately lands on poor, BIPOC communities in Minnesota.

## 03

# A Vision for the Future

We envision a just future where human services data is used for good, and harmful data practices do not exist. Data has the potential to build trusting relationships between communities, organizations and their funders, ensuring mutual accountability towards the shared goal of using funds to strengthen the community. We also recognize that data can enhance the effectiveness of human services organizations, particularly when analyzed and presented in a way that prioritizes participant voices and fosters organizational learning. Ultimately, data used for justice can improve the experiences and outcomes of community members who interact with human services. This is only possible when onerous and invasive data practices are abandoned, freeing up everyone's time, energy, and trust to focus on benefits to participants.

How do we know this future is possible? We already see Data Justice enacted every day by organizations, funders, and community members here in Minnesota who are re-envisioning their work. Here are a few examples of these local changemakers:

# Case Studies:

## FUNDERS

In 2016, Minnesota's [Office of Economic Opportunity](#), currently part of the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families, simplified the process Minnesotans use to qualify for federally-subsidized food through the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). In the past, MN TEFAP required documentary proof of need, which often included identification documents, medical cards for family members, proof of address, and check stubs to prove income. Eight years ago, MN TEFAP lifted those requirements. Now all they require is for an individual to self-report their name, address, head of household, and the number of family members, and self-attest that they meet the income guidelines. Since most food shelves and food banks in MN use the TEFAP program, this reduced barriers for nearly everyone in the state who needs emergency food.

## ORGANIZATIONS

[The Link](#), a member of the MACC Data Network, relies on and invests in participant voice in the form of three youth advisory boards consisting of current and former participants who are compensated for their labor and expertise. In March 2023, one of their youth advisory boards edited the organization's intake form. Applying a Data Justice lens, they removed unnecessary items, changed the language and order of questions to be both trauma informed and support positive youth development. The result is a document that supports a strengths-based intake interview that prioritizes youth participant experience.

Another MACC member organization, [Agate Housing and Services](#), has provided historical and cultural context to funders when necessary. In March 2022, a staff member preparing a report for a county funder noticed that her organization's data indicated low rates of homeownership among their Black participants. Higher rates of homeownership are seen as better by the funder, so the staff member did not want her organization's data to erroneously reflect badly on the Black community in the eyes of the funder. The staff member chose to research how the history of US housing policy and redlining have reduced the rate of homeownership among Black Americans in general, and include a summary of that information in her report to contextualize her organization's data. This could help the funder understand not only this organization's results but also the problem that the funder and the organization are trying to solve together.



## AND BEYOND

We have seen remarkable examples of community members taking control of their own data, such as the [Stop the Cradle to Prison Algorithm coalition's](#) work in Ramsey County in 2018 and 2019. The MACC Data Justice cohort has hoped to work hand-in-hand with program participants, so that our community's needs (not just organizations' perceptions of those needs) can truly be centered in Data Justice. We have not yet been able to fund this work, which must include ethically compensating community members for their effort and expertise.

We are also inspired by thought leadership at the regional level, such as [Chicago Beyond's](#) work on [equity-based community research practices](#), and at the national level, like the [Urban Institute's](#) work on [equitable data visualization](#), just to name a few.

All players in the human services ecosystem will have to work together to expand efforts like these and make further innovations. Together, we can enact Data Justice as a remedy to data challenges that are currently pervasive.

# 04

## What's Next

We're looking to you to join our efforts to bring Data Justice to life across the state of Minnesota by eliminating unnecessary, burdensome, and unjust data collection practices in the human services sector.

We've seen the harmful effect that unjust data practices have on communities receiving services, nonprofits and funders. Unjust data collection produces barriers for our community to access essential services, puts additional stress on nonprofits to keep acquiring and securely storing the data, and takes attention away from internal program evaluations. This hurts all of us.

## ACTION ITEMS

The way out of this is for human service organizations and their funders to work both independently and together on Data Justice to ensure the best experiences and outcomes for our shared participants and communities. There are concrete actions we can all work towards. Agencies working close to you are already taking these steps and our community is benefiting because of their just actions. Which steps have you already taken? Which will you take next?

### FUNDERS

- Only require data with a clear purpose. Audit and edit your reporting requirements so that every piece of data you invest in collecting is there for a specific, meaningful reason.
- Provide transparency about data requirements. Share with your grantees about the purpose of each data point. Make sure that your grantees know what's required and what is optional.
- Seek out, use, and accept secondary data sources (like [MN Compass](#) and the [US Census](#)) about needs and identities in your community instead of requiring this data to be collected directly from participants.
- Fund data collection, analysis, and reporting, with dollars over and above the base amount, as a part of all grants and contracts.
- Fund Data Justice directly. Support your grantees financially to align their data practices with Data Justice; this will require staff time and resources. Invest in a big gap area of Data Justice: centering participant voices in this conversation.
- Talk to other funders about Data Justice and how you are supporting it. Your voice will have the biggest impact in gaining allies.

### HUMAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

- Only collect data with a clear purpose. Audit and edit your data collection practices so that every piece of data you invest in collecting is there for a specific, meaningful reason.
- Provide transparency in data sharing. Get informed consent from participants before collecting data. Make sure participants know what is required and what is optional.
- Use trauma-informed data collection strategies. Reword or remove questions that are harmful or retraumatizing. Write strengths-based questions using accessible language.
- Use data for participants' benefit. Prioritize evaluation that contributes to program improvement, equity, and access to services. Regularly analyze the data you collect and take action based on your analysis.
- Elevate diverse voices and perspectives. Center participants and those with lived experiences in all decisions about data. Take special care to center participants who are negatively impacted by systems of oppression such as white supremacy. Prioritize the hiring and retention of BIPOC data professionals to ensure diversity of perspectives.
- Prioritize access to services. Reduce data-related barriers to services: fewer questions means quicker access to services. Consider other available data sources instead of asking participants.

# Links and References

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