

Pitfalls of Housing Prioritization: Considerations of Power and Culture

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The federal Domestic Violence and Housing Technical Assistance Consortium (the Consortium) is an innovative, collaborative approach to providing training, technical assistance, and resource development at the critical intersection of domestic and sexual violence, homelessness, and housing.

Funded and supported by an unprecedented partnership between the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Justice, and Department of Housing and Urban Development, this multi-year Consortium brings together national, state, and local organizations with deep expertise on housing, domestic and sexual violence in order to collaboratively build and strengthen technical assistance to both housing/homelessness providers and domestic/sexual violence service providers. The Consortium aims to improve policies, identify promising practices, and strengthen collaborations necessary to improve housing options for survivors of domestic and sexual violence and their children in order to enhance safety, stability, and well-being.

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In social contexts with limited and inequitable long-term housing access, housing prioritization usually involves multiple community institutions coordinating the distribution of scarce housing resources to those in greatest need. Three key influential factors are fundamental to this process:

1. The power of identification, determining who is deemed deserving of a resource
2. The power of choice, deciding what people get
3. The power of distribution, choosing how they get it

To facilitate the prioritization process, housing practitioners use assessments in an effort to ensure equitable resource distribution. These assessments attempt to quantify, using only a single score, vulnerabilities that exist at the intersection of social positionality (how identity is situated within the larger social power hierarchy) and lived experience (life events that shape freedom of movement, resource access, and personal choices). However, a single score determined from a one-time assessment is incapable of providing sufficient information to accurately assess vulnerability, especially among unstably housed domestic violence survivors. The purpose of this paper is to discuss power-laden assumptions in the prioritization process vis-à-vis the Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decisions Assistance Tool, or VI-SPDAT, and how it subsequently influences domestic violence survivors.

A Brief Overview of Power and Prioritization

An ongoing systematic divestment in public infrastructure and maintenance of structural oppression have created conditions that continuously result in housing shortages. As communities engage in long-term advocacy to increase housing stock and implement structural responses that provide universal housing options, systems are simultaneously involved in the short-term practice of determining equitable and effective prioritization and allocation processes. These processes often occur via an assessment of individuals in need of immediate housing resources.



The most common prioritization assessment used among Housing Continua of Care (CoCs) is the VI-SPDAT or an adapted variation. This tool assesses vulnerability to housing instability using a scoring process. High vulnerability scores precipitate placement in or

access to available housing resources in communities. Despite its frequent use, the VI-SPDAT is inherently flawed and perpetuates inequities in a system already fraught with racist and classist legacies. For example, studies conducted independently of the original VI-SPDAT developer, OrgCode, found that the tool does not accurately assess vulnerability domains or correctly predict expected housing placement outcomes (Brown et al., 2018; Balagot et al., 2019). Moreover, the tool better predicts the vulnerabilities of White people experiencing homelessness than the vulnerabilities of Black and Indigenous People of Color experiencing homelessness (Wilkey et al., 2019; Cronley, 2020).

While efforts to move away from first-come, first-serve resource allocation to systematized assessments for focused resource provision are critical; these assessments have rarely considered survivors' complex pathways of housing instability which often leaves survivors with low vulnerability scores. (For a more comprehensive discussion of the effectiveness of the VI-SPDAT on assessing survivor populations, see the paper [Assessing Vulnerability, Prioritizing Risk: The Limitations of the VI-SPDAT for Survivors of Domestic and Sexual Violence](#) in this series.) Prioritization scoring has a specific set of power-laden assumptions that are often incompatible with housing prioritization practices for domestic violence survivors, specifically survivors of color with histories of multiple and compounding marginalization. We discuss three assumptions that are pitfalls within the prioritization process:

1. System-defined vulnerabilities
2. Deficit-based scoring models
3. Norming whiteness

Power of Identification: The Pitfall of System-Defined Vulnerabilities



The prioritization process presupposes that assessors within housing systems are best equipped to identify and assess vulnerabilities. Core to this assumption are two components, definition and choice. Definition is the ability to decide what constitutes a vulnerability, and choice is determining appropriate housing options. The assessor is assumed to be accurate, comprehensive (to the extent that time allows), and place people into the most appropriate housing option. As such, given that vulnerability is system defined,

subsequent assessor-recommended housing options are based on what is available in the system rather than matching what survivors' actually need.

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Some CoCs who use the VI-SPDAT demonstrated a poor fit between domain-specific vulnerability scores, total vulnerability scores (how the systems define risk), and a person's re-entry into homelessness. In other words, an individual's previous unstable housing conditions or housing type, not the VI-SPDAT vulnerability score, predicted future homelessness (Brown et al., 2018). Evidence from the domestic violence field suggests that survivors are likely to be highly accurate when predicting their own risk of physical and psychological violence and that domestic violence advocates and survivors actually differ in conceptualizations about survivors' level of risk (Bennett Cattaneo, 2007; Bennett Cattaneo et al., 2007). This evidence suggests that relying on survivors' expertise in the assessment process may provide a more accurate understanding of how to maintain their safety and stabilize their housing, given that survivors are more knowledgeable about the complex interplay of their vulnerabilities and needs. Therefore, systems that seek to improve the fit between an individual's vulnerability and their housing placement may find it more beneficial to rely on survivor-defined vulnerabilities.

Power of Choice: The Pitfall of Deficit-Based Scoring Models

Prioritization processes assume that assessing immediate vulnerabilities will provide clear information for assessors to determine who is deserving of available safe and stabilizing housing resources. However, assessors often engage in complex moral decision making when allocating housing resources, despite having vulnerability scores to guide their decision. For example, assessors may ask: "If two people have the same vulnerability score, how do you decide who receives the resource?" or "What are the consequences of making the wrong determination?" Survivors who are seeking services may wonder: "How bad does my situation have to be in order to score high enough to obtain resources?"



The VI-SPDAT's vulnerability scores are based solely on an attempt to accurately measure a person's deficiency, shortcomings, or lack in topical life areas, which is inadequate for answering complex questions. Assessing by proxy whose vulnerabilities are the most severe is fundamentally difficult when comparing the diverse detrimental experiences of multiple people who all merit support. This aspect of the VI-SPDAT can be extremely problematic for domestic violence survivors, a population not considered in the initial

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conceptualization of the VI-SPDAT (OrgCode, 2020). Thus, the complex dynamics involved in leaving an abusive relationship and how these dynamics contribute to the cycle of housing instability are often not captured in this measure. The VI-SPDAT indicator of domestic violence is a three-pronged question that assesses relationship quality:

Would you say that your current homelessness was caused by any of the following:

- a. A relationship that broke down*
- b. An unhealthy or abusive relationship*
- c. Because family or friends caused you to lose your housing*

In practice, this question fails to evaluate the complexities of vulnerability and decreases the chances that survivors directly fleeing abusive homes will obtain a vulnerability score high enough to signal the need for intervention which can result in housing placement or access to resources. Demonstrating the problematic nature of this issue, a recent study of domestic violence survivors who sought help from the city housing system reported denying themselves basic needs such as food benefits or health insurance in order to be considered destitute enough to qualify for a chance to get a housing resource (Odongo & Nnawulezi, 2019).

This deficit-based scoring model also contributes to implementation issues in reporting. For example, assessors in multiple counties in Minnesota described having concerns with people not providing accurate or honest answers about their vulnerabilities. Some assessors attributed this to the ongoing shifts from past assessment processes that denied access to those with highly stigmatized life experiences (e.g., incarceration, substance use) to the current assessment process, which requires that people emphasize these life experiences. One assessor from this study stated:

“Other times, it would behoove you to not be as candid about some of your vulnerabilities, or especially some of your risky behaviors, because they are stigmatized or criminalized, whereas when you’re using the VI-SPDAT, the more pitiful you are, the better.” (Fritsch et al., 2017; p. 32)

Despite the complex moral decision making by assessors, those deemed highly vulnerable by the VI-SPDAT were still unlikely to be consistently matched with available housing options. Balagot and colleagues (2019) reported that receipt of designated state funding to house certain populations or differences in assessor implementation were more influential than having high vulnerability scores when assessing readiness for placement into permanent supportive housing. In sum, interpersonal factors such as assessor experiences and external factors such as funding allotments are somewhat stronger predictors of subsequent housing placement than individual scores.

Power of Distribution: The Pitfall of Norming Whiteness

Housing systems often develop and reify exclusionary practices that create inequitable outcomes for people of color, specifically Black and Indigenous people. A primary function in white-dominant cultures in the context of prioritization is the desire to invest in “quick fix” practices that remove choice. These functions operate on the assumption that rapid responses must constrain and limit options rather than expand them. These reductionist practices reinforce oppressive white-dominant cultural norms by favoring processes that make outcomes enumerable, even at the expense of sacrificing the inherent complexity and necessary nuance for housing placement. Individual assessments are essential to mobilize resources for survivors quickly, but those solely based on VI-SPDAT scores will not meet ongoing housing and safety needs. VI-SPDAT and other reductionist housing practices also favor white people’s experiences because these assessments were often developed, validated, and normed on primarily white samples. For example, Wilkey and colleagues (2019) found white people experiencing homelessness were more likely to receive a high VI-SPDAT vulnerability score than Black and Indigenous people of color, thereby increasing the likelihood that they receive resources. In another study, Cronley (2020) studied racial differences in VI-SPDAT scores among more than 1000 people who experienced homelessness. Similar to previous studies, white people had significantly higher domain-specific and total vulnerability scores compared to Black people; yet Black people were more likely to report a history of homelessness. Results also showed that despite having similar levels of trauma, white women’s total VI-SPDAT scores were, on average, higher than white men, Black men, and Black women. In fact, Black women had the lowest vulnerability scores of all four groups. These findings have significant housing access implications for people of color who experience homelessness, especially for Black and Indigenous survivors of color. In essence, the assessment was not designed to capture their violence experiences or their culturally specific vulnerabilities sufficiently.



What Should We Do?

The pitfalls present in prioritization can be mitigated by implementing strategies that:

1. Center the voices of survivors throughout the process
2. Seek to respond to the expressed needs of survivors
3. Formalize their meaningful contribution to the prioritization process

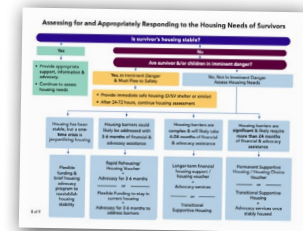
Use Survivor-Centered Approaches to Assess Vulnerabilities



Domestic violence places survivors at high risk for housing instability which increases the possibility for people to experience violence, both of which are inadequately captured in current vulnerability assessments. The factors that exacerbate survivors' vulnerability for future violence contribute to their becoming unhoused. Therefore, it remains critical to use strategies that focus on how survivors identify their own experiences because they are often the best assessors of their own risk.

Shift to Needs-Based Assessments

One type of survivor-centered approach is a need-based assessment, as opposed to one that is scoring-based. As explained by the paper [Assessing for and Appropriately Responding to the Housing Needs of Domestic and Sexual Violence Survivors: A Decision Tree as an Alternative to a Scoresheet](#) in this series, housing resource allocation should be matched with the direct needs of survivors rather than system-defined vulnerabilities. Needs-based assessments also move practitioners away from providing options to survivors simply based on what is available and move towards being responsive to survivors' needs. In addition, needs-based assessments offer opportunities for capturing and addressing complexity while also informing swift intervention.



The responsiveness of housing systems during the COVID-19 pandemic is exemplary of the positive outcomes that can stem from flexible, needs-based assessments. During the pandemic, the nation watched as counties began developing more flexible housing options and support in response to unstable previously relied upon housing resources. With greater barriers and increased immediacy in need, there was a collective mobilization in many communities to house people quickly and safely. In some jurisdictions, survivors were moved into hotels. In other jurisdictions, they were placed in long-term apartments on subsidies. Communities that normally relied on scoring-based assessments rapidly shifted to a complete needs-based model, illuminating its possibility of ongoing use in the current housing system. As the world continues to change and a reimagining of all social systems becomes more urgent, there is little need to return to older systems' norms and practices. Instead, advocates should continue to push for more flexible policies and procedures that supply options based on need.

Involve Survivors in the Process of Identification, Choice, and Distribution



Survivors should have meaningful input in the development and ongoing modification of the prioritization processes to maintain equity. There are multiple ways to shift the power of identification, choice, and distribution to the survivor. One of the most common ways is to develop coalitions or collectives comprised of survivors who have experienced instability or homelessness. These groups can serve as a primary decision-making body for various types of assessments. Another opportunity to

ensure meaningful inclusion of survivors is to invite them to serve on Boards of Directors of community-based domestic violence or housing organizations, create advisory groups for interagency collaborations, and commissions at the city and federal level, thereby informing systems change. These practices would allow for the transparency of the process and ensure accountability within institutions. It is also critical to support community organizers and political advocacy groups in the fight against the oppressive conditions that create the need for prioritization. Advocates must continue to increase the amount of high quality, affordable, and safe housing units and build support for universal housing and basic income to eradicate inequities.

In conclusion, the current process for housing prioritization vis-à-vis the VI-SPDAT is grounded in assumptions that are, at a minimum, misaligned with its original intention, resulting in increased racial housing disparities and ignoring the complexity of survivor needs. Issues with current prioritization practices that rely on systems defining needs and deficit-based scores can be rectified by shifting to using flexible and survivor-centered need-based assessments. Meaningful engagement with unstably housed survivors would provide clearer insights on the mismatches between vulnerabilities and placements and offer ways to develop a more racially just prioritization processes. Rather than investing any additional time, energy, or resources in additional scoring protocols, it is time for a radical shift in housing prioritization that focuses on using equitable and responsive assessments while addressing structural factors such as affordable housing availability.

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