You're probably lying about homelessness

CAEH Conference 2023

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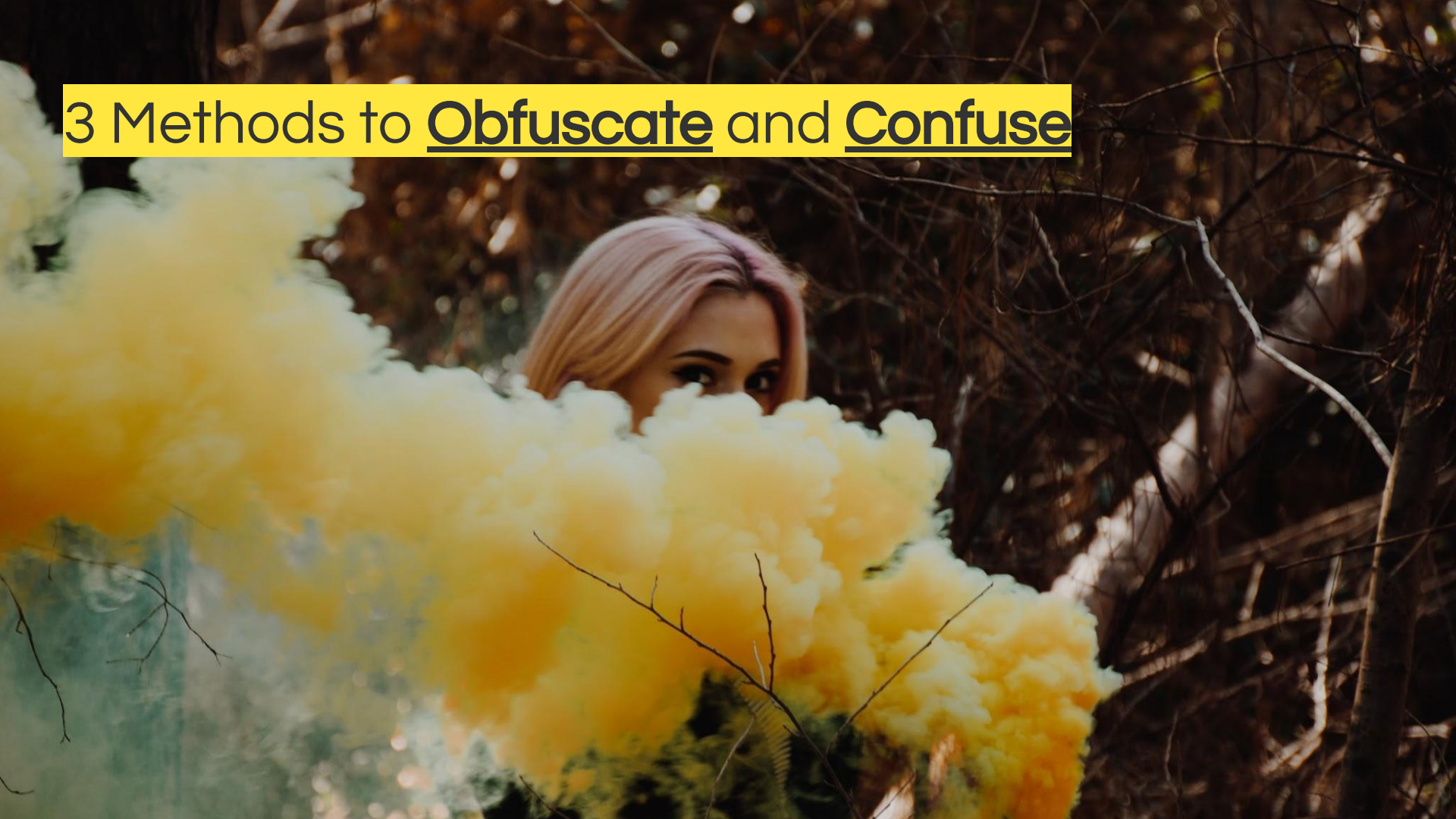
You’re probably lying about homelessness

But it’s not your fault.

Homelessness is **complicated**!


3 Methods to Obfuscate and Confuse

Disclaimer

In this presentation I use real world data that does not always paint a flattering picture. I am not picking on anyone in particular, and I try to pick on lots of different communities equally. In fact, some of the sources I use are actually very good.

My point is that **any data can be taken out of context and misrepresented**.

All this data is publicly available and published online. If you are uncomfortable with my use of your data, email me: ali@acreconsulting.ca

Method 1:

Present meaningless data without explaining it

"**86%** of people surveyed fall between the **ages of 18-54**"

2018 Charlottetown Point in Time Count

What does this say?

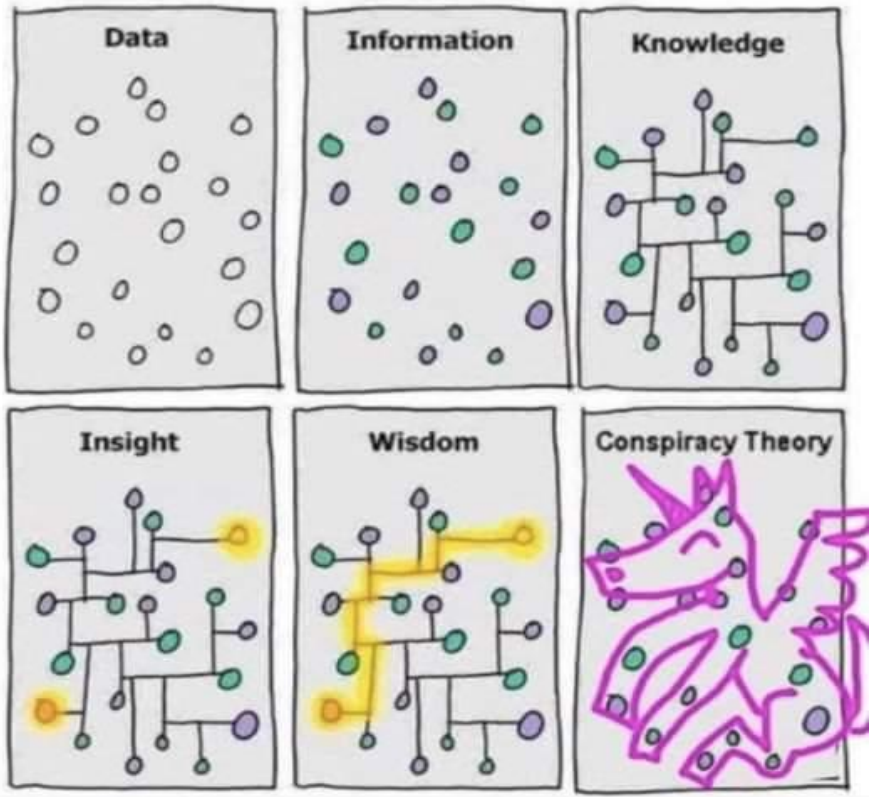
Okay, so most of the people surveyed were adults. But why is that important?

What does this say about homeless **children in families** or **unaccompanied youth**? Does it mean that there aren't many, or just that we didn't survey them?

Does it mean that we are doing a good job at addressing **senior homelessness**? Or are all the homeless seniors dying early? Or maybe there's a lot of senior homelessness?

Without some more context, this data point is not helpful.

Raw Data is not Helpful

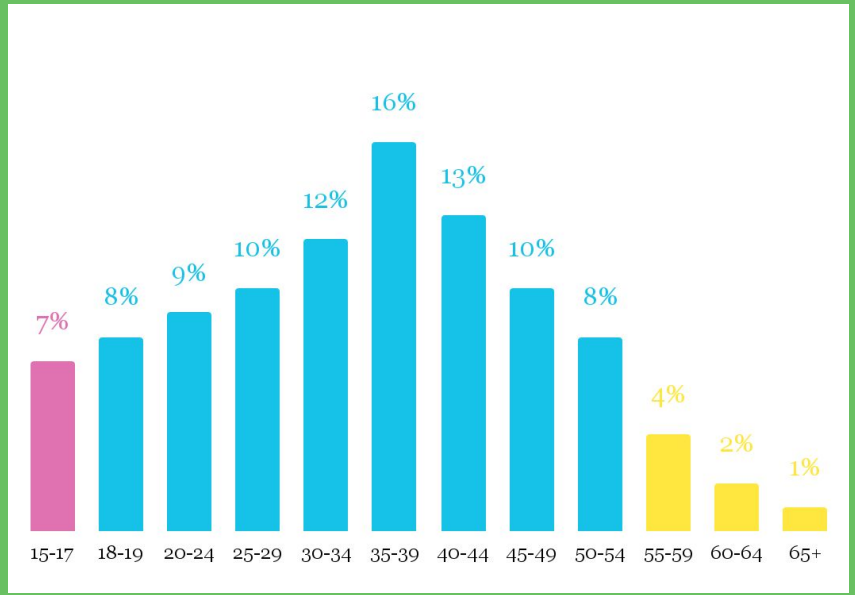


Key Takeaway:

Always ask what a data point ***means****.*

Alternate Version

“86% were aged 18-54”



Method 1*b*:

Present meaning~~less~~*ful* data without explaining it

"**22%** said that they [had Indigenous ancestry or status]"

2018 Halifax Point in Time Count Report

What does this say?

Again, we ask: **is 22% a big number or a small number**?

- If you're in Waterloo, ON, this looks big: their data shows 11% are Indigenous.
- If you're in Saskatoon, SK, this looks tiny: their most recent PIT showed 85% reporting Indigenous identity.

Just presenting this data point on its own, without a comparison, leaves readers guessing.

Key Takeaway:

When you're not sure the significance of data, look for a ***comparison****.*

Alternate Version

“22% reported Indigenous identity”

“22% of homeless people reported Indigenous identity, compared to only 4% of the general population”

Method 1*c*:

Mix meaningful and meaningless data together!

"**56%** were male, **42%** were female, **8%** identified as LGBTQ2S. **17%** were Indigenous or had Indigenous ancestry, **35%** identified as being part of a racial group other than White..."

I Count: York Region's 2018 Point in Time Count

"...**4%** were refugees or refugee claimants, **12%** were immigrants, **80%** were not immigrants or refugees. **26%** were youth (aged 16-24)."

I Count: York Region's 2018 Point in Time Count

Key Takeaway:

A wall of data
overwhelms
your readers.

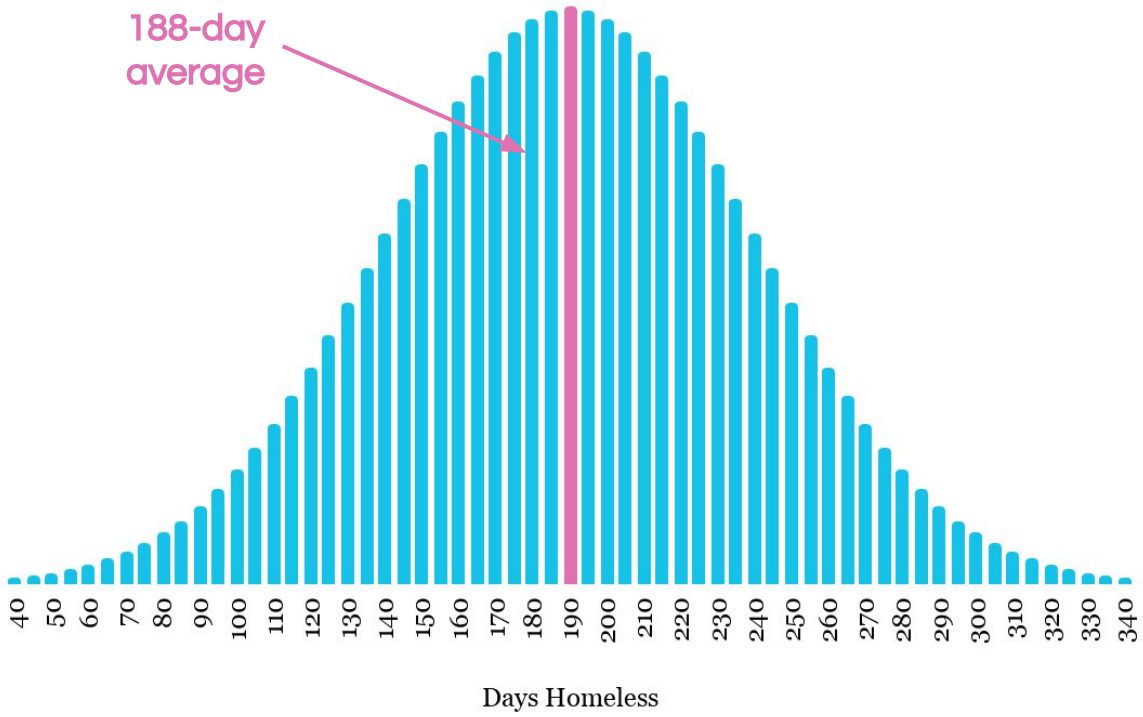
Method 2:

Abuse mean and median to your advantage

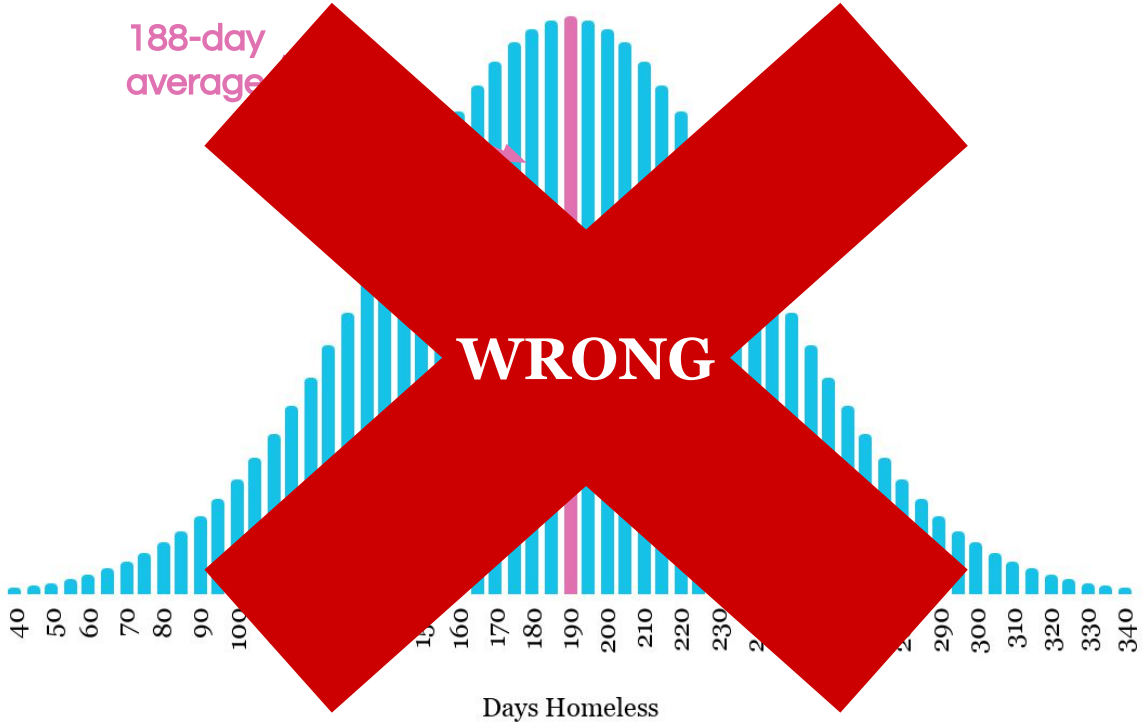
“188 days:
The **average length of time** people spent homeless within the past year”

Results of the Urban Kingston 2018 Point-in-Time Count

Most people hear “average” and think bell curve



Most people hear “average” and think bell curve



Huh?

Crash Course in Grade 6 Math

Assuming the set of numbers:

$$1, 2, 3, 24, 70$$

Crash Course in Grade 6 Math

Assuming the set of numbers:

$$1, 2, 3, 24, 70$$

The **average** (also called **mean**) is: $(1+2+3+24+70) / 5$

$= 100 / 5$

$= \mathbf{20}$

Crash Course in Grade 6 Math

Assuming the set of numbers:

1, 2, 3, 24, 70

The **average** (also called **mean**) is: (1+2+3+24+70) / 5

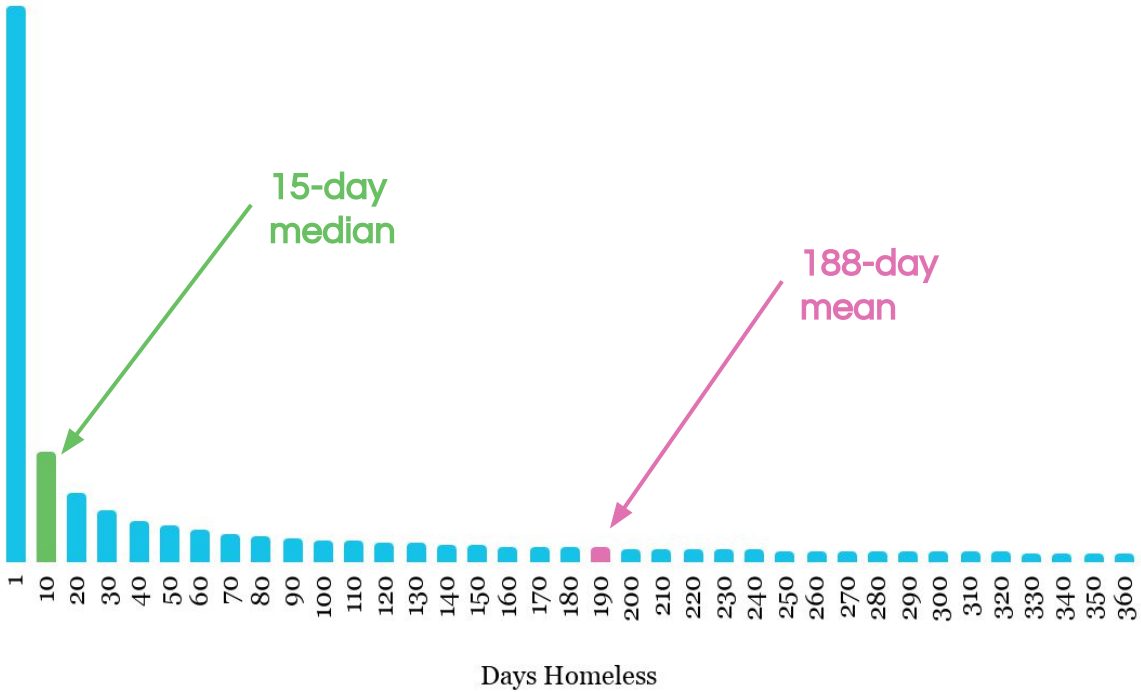
= 100 / 5

= **20**

The **median** is the middle value: 1, 2, **3**, 24, 70

= **3**

Power Law Curve



Key Takeaway:

When you have a few ***extreme data points****, averages are affected but medians are not.*

Alternate Version

“The average length of time people spent homeless in the last year was 188 days”

“The typical length of time people spent homeless in the last year was 15 days, but some were homeless much longer”

Method 3:
Cherry-pick your data source

"In 2018, **22.3%** of shelter users in the sample met the criteria for experiencing **chronic homelessness**."

National Shelter Study 2018 Update

"People experiencing **chronic homelessness** accounted for **60%** of all respondents"

Everyone Counts 2018

How does that make sense?

Look at the **data sources**

“In 2018, 22.3% of shelter users in the sample met the criteria for experiencing chronic homelessness.”

National Shelter Study 2018 Update

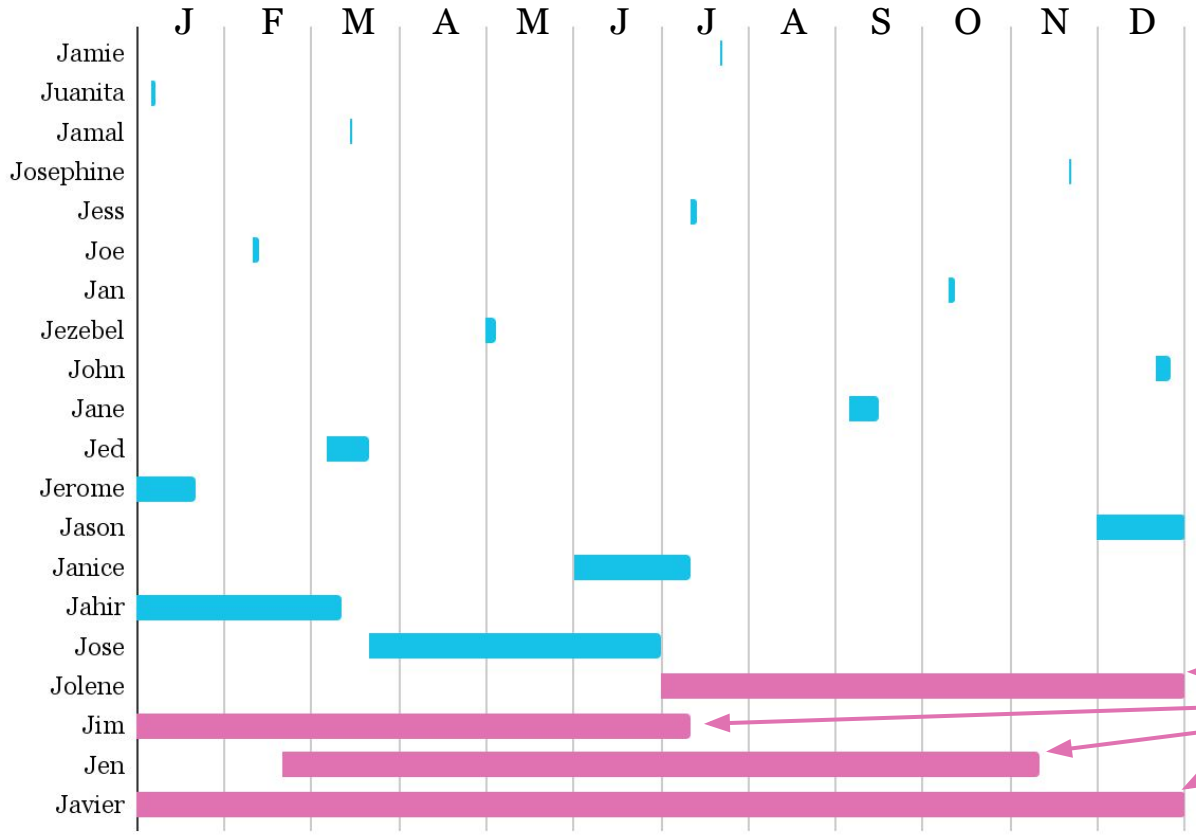
Data from the whole year

“People experiencing chronic homelessness accounted for 60% of all respondents”

Everyone Counts 2018

Data from just one day

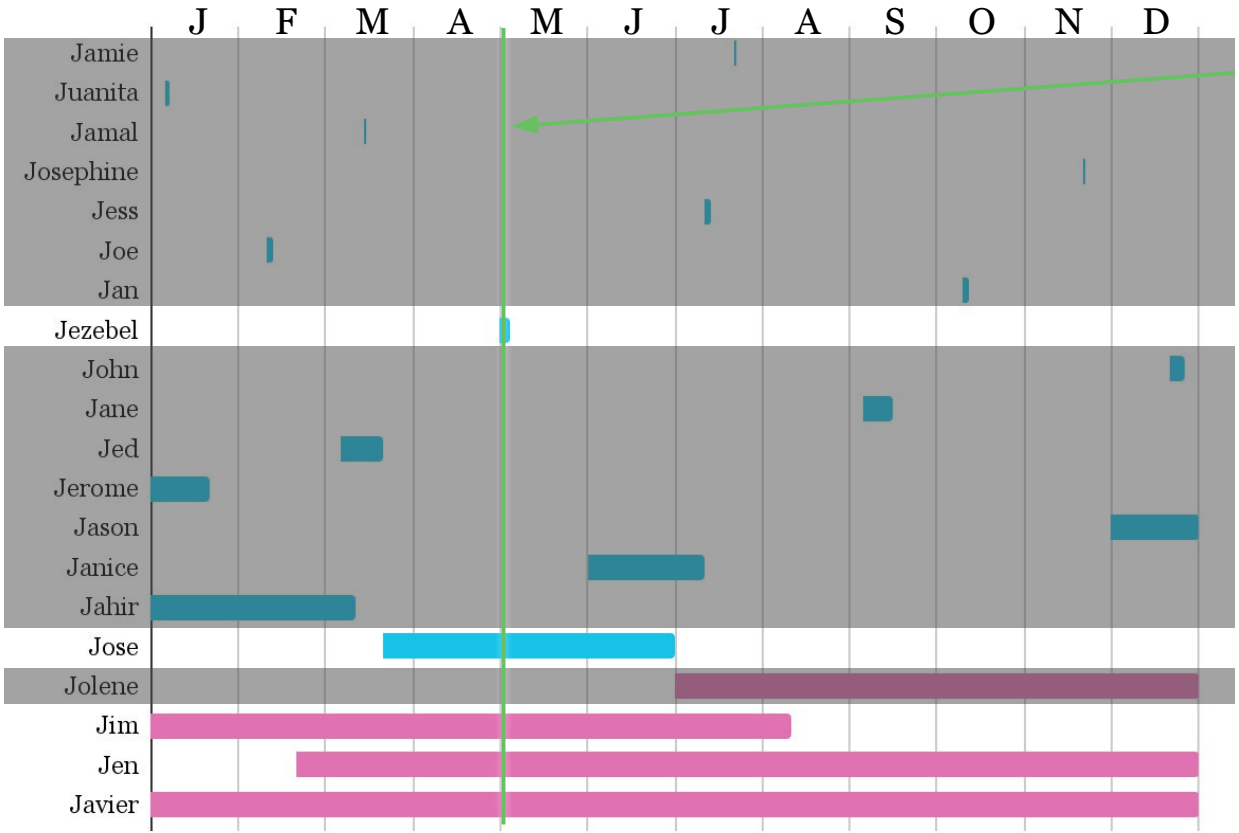
Over Time



Homelessness from January to December

4/20 (20%) are chronically homeless

Point in Time



Homelessness on May 1

3/5 (60%) are chronically homeless

Key Takeaway:

You get very different data at a ***point in time*** *versus* ***over time****.*

Alternate Version

“60% were chronically homelessness”

“20% of those who become homeless experience chronic homelessness, but that proportion is rising.”

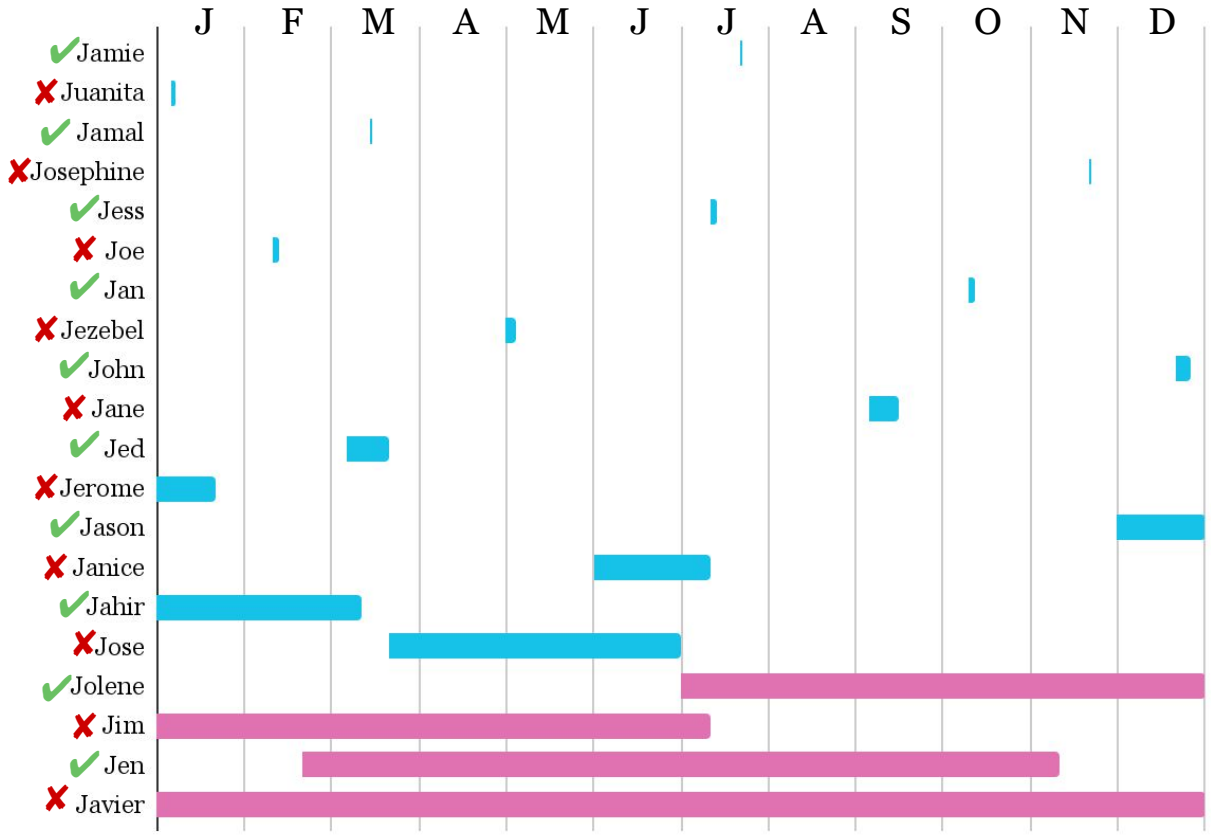
Method 3*b*:

Make your <u>percentages</u> big!

"**More than half** of respondents had not completed high school, only had primary or did not have formal education."

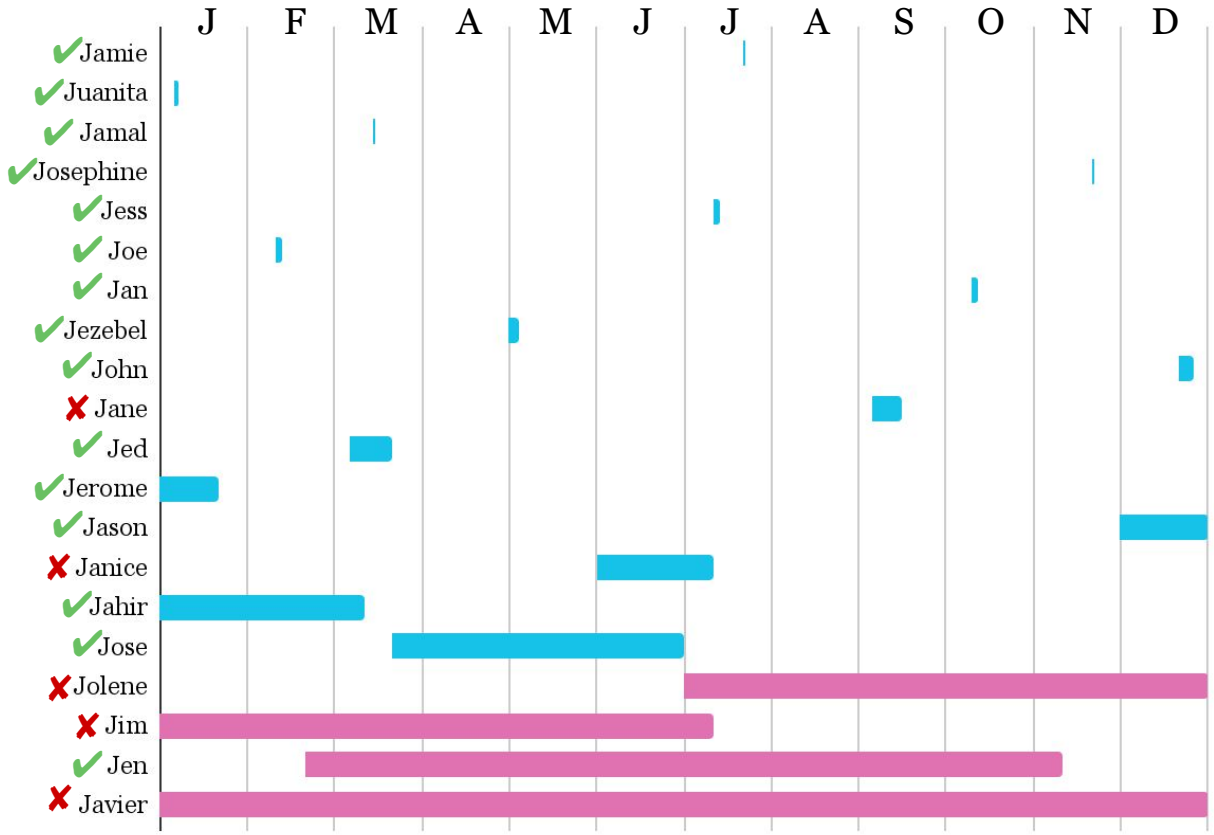
Winnipeg Street Census 2022

Sounds like...



Every second person didn't finish school (10/20)

It's probably more like...



Most homeless people have finished school (15/20)

Most chronically homeless people did not (3/4)

Key Takeaway:

Chronic homelessness is ***overrepresented*** *in Point in Time Counts.*

Alternate Version

“More than half of respondents had not completed high school”

“Chronically homeless respondents were 4x more likely to have not completed high school”

Method 3*c*:

Make your numbers big!

“Number of Canadians who used an emergency shelter [in 2018]: **137,000**”

The National Shelter Study 2005-2014

That’s more than my entire hometown!

Key Takeaway:

The longer the period of time, ***the bigger the numbers*** *will be.*

Alternate Version

“137,000 used an emergency shelter last year”

“About 14,000 people were staying in shelters on an average day last year”

Method 3*d*:

Mix and match your data source*s*

“Number of Canadians who used an emergency shelter: **137,000**”

+

“People experiencing **chronic homelessness** accounted for **60%** of all respondents”

That’s 82,000 chronically homeless people!

Key Takeaway:

Be very careful when
combining data
from different sources.

Key Takeaways

- Ask what the data point **means**. Find a **comparison**.
- Avoid a **wall of data**.
- Remember: **averages are skewed** by extreme values, but **medians** are not.
- Ask whether a data point is from a **point in time** or from a **longer period**.
- **Chronic homelessness** is overrepresented in point in time counts.
- Avoid **combining data** from different sources.

~~Victims~~ Sources

- Prince Edward Island 2018 PiT Count Executive Summary Report
- Everyone Counts: Report on the 2018 Halifax Point in Time Count
- I Count: York Region's 2018 Homeless Count
- Results of the Urban Kingston 2018 Point-in-Time Count
- National Shelter Study 2018 Update
- The National Shelter Study 2005-2014
- Everyone Counts 2018
- Winnipeg Street Census 2022