



Taxpayers Association Finds Little Useful Data to Assess Impact of Homelessness Services, Despite Huge Increase in Public Spending

A new study by the San Diego Taxpayers Educational Foundation, SDCTA's research arm, finds significant gaps and little unity in methods of data collection between cities in San Diego County; SDCTA recommends steps for data standardization

SAN DIEGO (March 26, 2019) — Government spending on homelessness services has increased twenty-fold over the last ten years in San Diego County—but there's no way to tell the scale of the impact of those public dollars, according to a study released today by the research arm of the San Diego County Taxpayers Association (SDCTA).

The report from the San Diego Taxpayers Educational Foundation (SDTEF), titled [*Homelessness Expenditure in the San Diego Region*](#), finds that individual cities' methods of data collection on homelessness, from services participation to actual homeless population counts, are inadequate. Therefore, the data collected from all jurisdictions within San Diego County does not hold enough statistical integrity to track the issue over time, or evaluate the effectiveness of tax dollar spending.

"As long as cities within San Diego County continue to use different methods to measure the impact of homelessness services, we don't know what we don't know," said SDCTA's President and CEO Haney Hong. "Government spending on homelessness reduction efforts has steadily increased over the past decade, but our research shows that homelessness has not steadily decreased."

Homelessness Expenditure in the San Diego Region aimed to inform the public, government agencies and philanthropic donors about trends in homelessness within San Diego County, in order to improve policy and practice. SDTEF researchers studied public reports to identify and analyze the relationship, if any, between local government spending on homelessness reduction programs and the number of homeless individuals (defined by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development as people who lack "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence"). The report found that the amount spent does not have an observable, consistent impact on homelessness in the San Diego region.

"It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the Point-In-Time data, and the challenges of using only this data to make important decisions on how to address the urgent issue of homelessness," said Tamera Kohler, Chief Executive Officer of the San Diego Regional Task Force on the Homeless. "We recognize the need for more accurate and actionable data, and



have already begun to take appropriate steps. A complete overhaul and update of our Homeless Management database which was completed in early January this year. This database makes it easier for agencies to gather more detailed and precise information on both the numbers and types of homeless individuals in San Diego. We encourage community leaders to consider using more data in planning and measuring their investments around this work."

Between 2009 and 2018, local spending on homelessness in San Diego County increased by over 2,000 percent, or approximately twenty-fold. However, SDTEF's research is unable to establish a statistical correlation between spending on homelessness reduction programs and local homeless counts. For example, according to data reported from multiple cities, in San Diego County, the homeless population was higher in 2015 than in 2014 and 2016 – despite a steady increase in funds. The study's inability to establish a statistical correlation can largely be attributed to inconsistent tracking of homeless individuals between cities.

"Many of the city officials we spoke to fully understand that there are discrepancies in the data on homelessness services, and we know our cities' resources are stretched" said Xiomalys Crespo, SDCTA's Public Policy Manager and primary author of *Homelessness Expenditure in the San Diego Region*. "However, there are cost-effective ways to get on track. At the end of our report, we make the following recommendations: 1.) City leaders across San Diego County need to agree on which standards to adhere to, and one modernized model to track homelessness, using targeted approaches and standardized metrics; 2.) Cities need to have homelessness expertise on hand for monitoring programs that serve the homeless population, to ensure that they're operating efficiently; and 3.) Cities need to come together on a strategic ten-year action plan with performance incentives for local governments that make significant impact according to the data standards everyone agreed on."

"The County of San Diego is committed to further investment in a seamless system where data on people experiencing homelessness can be collected, shared and analyzed by leaders in each of the 18 cities and our unincorporated communities," said Helen Robbins-Meyer, Chief Administrative Officer for the County of San Diego. "This is a smart path forward for local government and our regional partners, and one that will allow all of us to accurately document both raw numbers and outcomes so we can most effectively leverage public funds and regional resources."

Added Hong, SDCTA's CEO: "There are so many things that cause people to become homelessness, and our tax dollars go nowhere if we don't measure and react. The Taxpayers Association calls on all the cities in San Diego County to improve their tracking of homelessness program expenditures, while also supporting the San Diego Regional Task Force on the Homeless in gathering information about who is homeless within their city limits, and how they became homeless.



“The Taxpayers Association wants to work with cities in San Diego to help them figure out how they can streamline their data collection. That way, they can use it to coordinate effective policies that serve homeless populations, and ultimately reduce homelessness in our county.”

Read *Homelessness Expenditure in the San Diego Region* on the [SDCTA website](#).

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***The San Diego County Taxpayers Association (@sdcta)** is a non-profit, non-partisan organization, dedicated to promoting accountable, cost-effective and efficient government and opposing unnecessary new taxes and fees. For the last 73 years, the SDCTA has been providing information to help educate the public and save the region’s taxpayers millions. Public opinion polls consistently rate the SDCTA as the most “influential” and “trusted” public policy institution in San Diego.*

***The San Diego Taxpayers Educational Foundation (SDTEF)** is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation founded in 1988 with the purpose of conducting studies and researching activities for the support and benefit of the San Diego County Taxpayers Association. The mission of the SDTEF is to conduct fiscal and economic research and analysis of governmental revenue and expenditure policies in San Diego County. The Foundation educates San Diegans on these important issues through for-credit and not-for-credit educational programs.*