PRIORITY QUEUE:
RANKING, SORTING AND PRIORITIZING

Diana Acosta-Navas Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow
McCoy Family Center for Ethics – Stanford HAI
Contents

• Values in technology
• Coordinated Entry System
• Values Embedded
• Value Conflicts
Values in Technology

- Design decisions encode values.
- They are expressive of what we care about.
- They reveal our assumptions about the world and the people who will be interacting with our design and benefiting from it.
Values in Technology

**Explicit values:** Values that designers intend their products to embody

**Collateral values:** Values that crop up as side effects of design decisions and the way users interact with them
Values in Technology

**Explicit values:** Values that designers intend their products to embody

**Collateral values:** Values that are not explicitly encoded but crop up as side effects of design decisions and the way users interact with them
Value tensions and conflicts may arise when the system operates in the world.
Priority Queue

- In a queue, the first-in-first-out rule is implemented.

- A priority queue is a special type of queue in which each element is associated with a priority value. Elements are served on the basis of their priority. That is, higher priority elements are served first.
Priority Queue Implemented as Heap

![Priority Queue Diagram]
Priority Queue of People’s Housing Needs
What do we use Priority Queue for?

- Triage
- Vaccines
- Organ donation
- Social assistance programs
Coordinated Entry System

- Centralized system for the allocation and provision of services to the unhoused.

- Provides standardized intake process to reduce waste, redundancy, and double dipping across agencies.
Before the Coordinated Entry System

- Unhoused people navigated a complex system of waitlists and social service programs
- Competition for rooms and funding among service providers.
- Corruption
Coordinated Entry System

Two Philosophies

- Housing First
- Prioritization according to need
Coordinated Entry System

Housing First

• Research by Psychologist Sam Tsemberis (2004)
• Rejection of “house-readiness” approach
• Anti-paternalistic
• Better results
• Less public spending
Coordinated Entry System

Housing First

- Research by Psychologist Sam Tsemberis (2004)
- Rejection of “house-readiness” approach
- Anti-paternalistic
- Better results
- Less public spending

➤ Scarce resources and growing needs
Coordinated Entry System

Prioritization according to need

- **Crisis homelessness**
  - Requires a small, time-limited investment

- **Chronic homelessness**
  - Associated with other problems
  - Requires more complex social support
Coordinated Entry System

Prioritization according to need

- Need for a system that enabled agencies to:
  - Identify individuals’ and households’ needs
  - Sort them
  - Allocate resources
Coordinated Entry System

Entering the system

Meeting the definition of “literal homelessness”

Data gathering

Unhoused person provides personal information including name, DOB, SSN, immigration status, disability, current & past mental health, sexual activity, substance use.

Ranking

Algorithm uses personal data to assign a number from 1-17, least vulnerable to most vulnerable.

Matching

Risk score is used to assign housing and housing related services.
Coordinated Entry System

Entering the system
Meeting the definition of “literal homelessness”

Data gathering
Unhoused person provides personal information including name, DOB, SSN, immigration status, disability, current & past mental health, sexual activity, substance use.

Ranking
Algorithm uses personal data to assign a number from 1-17, least vulnerable to most vulnerable.

Matching
Risk score is used to assign housing and housing related services.

Priority Queue!
Least vulnerable:
short-term shelter

No Services Provided

Most vulnerable:
long term housing
Design decisions?

- Sort individuals based on certain characteristics
  - Which characteristics?
  - How are they weighted?
  - What data is needed?
  - How do we gather information?
  - Categories?

- Once they are classified and ordered, how do we treat individuals in each category?

- How do you treat the data?
Encoded Values?

- Efficient use of resources
- Neutrality
- Promoting autonomy
- Priority of the worst-off
Encoded Values?

Efficient use of resources
Efficiency?

- C.E.S. was intended to reduce public spending by streamlining the process of housing allocation.

- It sought to optimize the use of existing housing resources by allocating them to the people who would benefit most from them.
Efficiency?

- Total cost to L.A. County: $11 million
  - The C.E.S. did improve matching between people and services but didn’t increase the number of people housed.

- Cost per housed person: $1140
  - Would the $11 million have been better spent on giving each person $1,140 to put towards a security deposit for an apartment?
Encoded Values?

- Efficient use of resources
- Neutrality
- Promoting autonomy
- Priority of the worst-off
Encoded Values?
Neutrality?

“I’m doing the matching and it’s very unbiased as far as our work because the computer tells me, based on a scoring system, which families are higher need than other families”

Worker Interviewed
According to Need Podcast
Neutrality?

Vulnerability assessment:

- If no one intervenes
  - Death
  - Chronic homelessness
  - Use of costly social services

- Some criteria
  - Physical or mental illness
  - Disability
  - Addiction
  - Length of time unhoused
Neutrality?

Unintended consequence:

- Because of economic disparities, it is easier for people of color to become unhoused.
- A higher proportion of white unhoused people meet the criteria of high vulnerability.
- White unhoused individuals score higher on the ranking and are more likely to receive benefits.
Neutrality?

- Individual vulnerability does not take structural factors into consideration.
- But these factors affect some people disproportionately.
- Which could make the system work less effectively for people of color.
Encoded Values?

- Efficient use of resources
- Neutrality
- Promoting autonomy
- Priority of the worst-off
Encoded Values?

Promoting autonomy
Autonomy?

No other path to services

Sensitive data
- Demographic
- SSN
- Immigration status
- Mental health
- Disability
- History of domestic violence
- Sexual activity
- Substance use
“It was like I was talking to my therapist [...] I was honest. I would prefer to do [the survey] with somebody that I trust,” she says, laughing and sorting through her monkey-shaped backpack. “But I would have done it with a stranger if I had to do that to get housed.... If it was to get me a roof over my head, I will talk to you, and tell you the truth, and tell you what you want to hear.”

Eubanks (2018), p. 96
Autonomy?

• Survey responses are shared with 168 agencies.

• Consent is valid for 7 years

• Initially there were rigorous procedures for data protection, but later, SSNs were introduced and linked to sensitive personal data.

• Absent strong data protection rules, C.E.S. enables a system of increased surveillance of the unhoused.
Autonomy?

"The pattern of increased data collection, sharing and surveillance reinforces the criminalization of the unhoused, if only because so many of the basic conditions of being homeless – having nowhere to sleep, nowhere to put your stuff, nowhere to go to the bathroom – are officially crimes [...] tickets turn into warrants and then law enforcement has further reason to search the databases to find “fugitives”"

Eubanks (2018)
Autonomy?

- The behavior of the unhoused is therefore more visible, trackable, and predictable.
- The values of individual autonomy and self-determination are in tension with a state of surveillance.
Encoded Values?

- Efficient use of resources
- Neutrality
- Promoting autonomy
- Priority of the worst-off
Encoded Values?

Priority of the worst-off
The worst off?

• Between 2014 and 2018, the C.E.S. in L.A. surveyed 31,124 individuals and connected 9,627 with housing (or housing-related resources).

• Some people aren’t considered ”literally homeless”, and some make it to the system but receive no assistance.

• Sometimes housing is not available, or interviews go poorly, and vouchers expire after 6 months. People must go through the process all over again.
The worst off?

- What happens with those individuals in the middle that do not receive services?
  - Accumulated frustration and trauma may lead to decreasing mental health.
  - Enhanced surveillance may lead to diminished resources and sometimes incarceration.
  - The model counts prison as housing so may lower their scores in the future.
The worst off?

1-4: Least vulnerable -> short-term shelter

14-17: Most vulnerable -> long term apartment

No Services Provided

A new category of people seen as persistently un-houseable by the algorithm?
The worst off?

• By creating these categories, it is possible to create a self-reinforcing cycle, making it increasingly difficult for persons to exit the category.
Conclusions

• Priority queues may be used to address social problems in innovative ways.
• Design decisions that go into ranking algorithms embody values and principles.
• When they are used in complex social contexts, conflicts may emerge between the system’s intended values and its impact, or between values themselves.
Priority Queue of People’s Housing Needs
Conclusions

- Priority queues may be used to address social problems in innovative ways.
- Design decisions that go into ranking algorithms embody values and principles.
- When they are used in complex social contexts, conflicts may emerge between the system’s intended values and its impact, or between values themselves.
Thank you!

Please reach out if you have any questions!
DACOSTAN@STANFORD.EDU
References


• Katie Mingle (Host) 2021/03/17, “The List” (No. 5) [Audio podcast episode] In: According to Need. 99 Percent Invisible. https://99percentinvisible.org/need/


• Tsemberis, S. J. (2010). Housing first: The Pathways model to end homelessness for people with mental illness and addiction.