A DATA-INTEGRITY FIELD GUIDE

Questions to Ask Before You Trust a Number

> A number in a report looks certain. Whether you can believe it is a different question.

Behind every number in a report is a person — someone served, counted, housed, or missed. That's what makes trusting a number carefully a matter of getting the people right, not just the math. A figure arrives looking finished, but it's only as sound as the data and the choices behind it, and those are almost never shown. Before you make a decision, brief a board, or repeat a figure to a funder, it's worth asking a few questions — of your own data and of the numbers others hand you. None of these require a statistics background. They just require refusing to take a number at face value.

WHERE THE NUMBER CAME FROM

- [ ] ### Where did this number come from, and how clean is the data beneath it?

  Most numbers trace back to records built one entry at a time, often under pressure. Missing fields, duplicates, and inconsistent entry are normal — and **every gap or error in the underlying data is carried forward, invisibly, into the final figure.** Good numbers rest on well-maintained data.

- [ ] ### Does this term mean the same thing everywhere it's counted?

  "Enrolled," "served," "housed," "exited" — these sound precise but often mean different things across agencies, programs, or even staff. **If the definition shifts, the total is adding up things that aren't the same.**

- [ ] ### Who is missing from this data?

  The people a system serves least well are often the ones least visible in its records — never enrolled, turned away, or dropped before being counted. **A number describes who's in the data, not who's in the community.** Because those gaps often fall along lines of race, disability, or other barriers, who's missing is frequently an equity question as much as a data one.

WHAT THE NUMBER IS ACTUALLY SAYING

- [ ] ### Is this a rate or a raw count — and what's the denominator?

  "68% success" sounds strong until you ask: 68% of whom? **A percentage is only as sound as its denominator.** If the people who dropped out were quietly excluded, the rate describes the survivors, not the program.

- [ ] ### Is a correlation being described as if it caused something?

  Correlation does not equal causation. "Clients who attended more sessions had better outcomes" is not the same as "the sessions caused the outcomes" — the people who show up more may simply be different to begin with. Watch for language that quietly upgrades a link into a cause.

☐ Is the sample big enough to carry the claim?

A "40% improvement" based on ten people can flip with two different outcomes. **Small numbers swing wildly**, and a confident percentage can hide a sample too small to mean much. Ask for the raw counts underneath.

☐ What assumptions and context does this number depend on?

Every figure sits on a set of choices — what was included, what was left out, what was assumed, and the conditions it was measured under. **A number lifted out of its context can quietly mean the opposite of what it did in place.** Before you rely on it, ask what has to be true for it to hold — and whether those things still are.

Trusting a number isn't about doubting everything. It's about knowing what you're standing on before you build on it.

Asking these questions well is a core part of rigorous evaluation — of your own work and everyone else's. To think through the numbers behind your program, visit **homelessresponselab.com**.