



# **DOCUMENTING THE “INVISIBLE POPULATION” WITH Z-CODES: A STEP FORWARD IN REDUCING HOMELESSNESS**

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# INVISIBLE POPULATIONS: A DEFINITION

**“The terms “invisible populations” or “hidden populations” in mental health refer to people with mental health conditions [or intellectual disabilities] that are not immediately apparent to others and/or are difficult to track and include in research” (Tasse, et al., 2021)**

**The “Invisible Population” Project focus:  
Adult children with severe mental illness (SMI) living with aging parents, family members or caregivers.**

**A brief history of the Invisible Population...**

# THE INVISIBLE POPULATION PROJECT

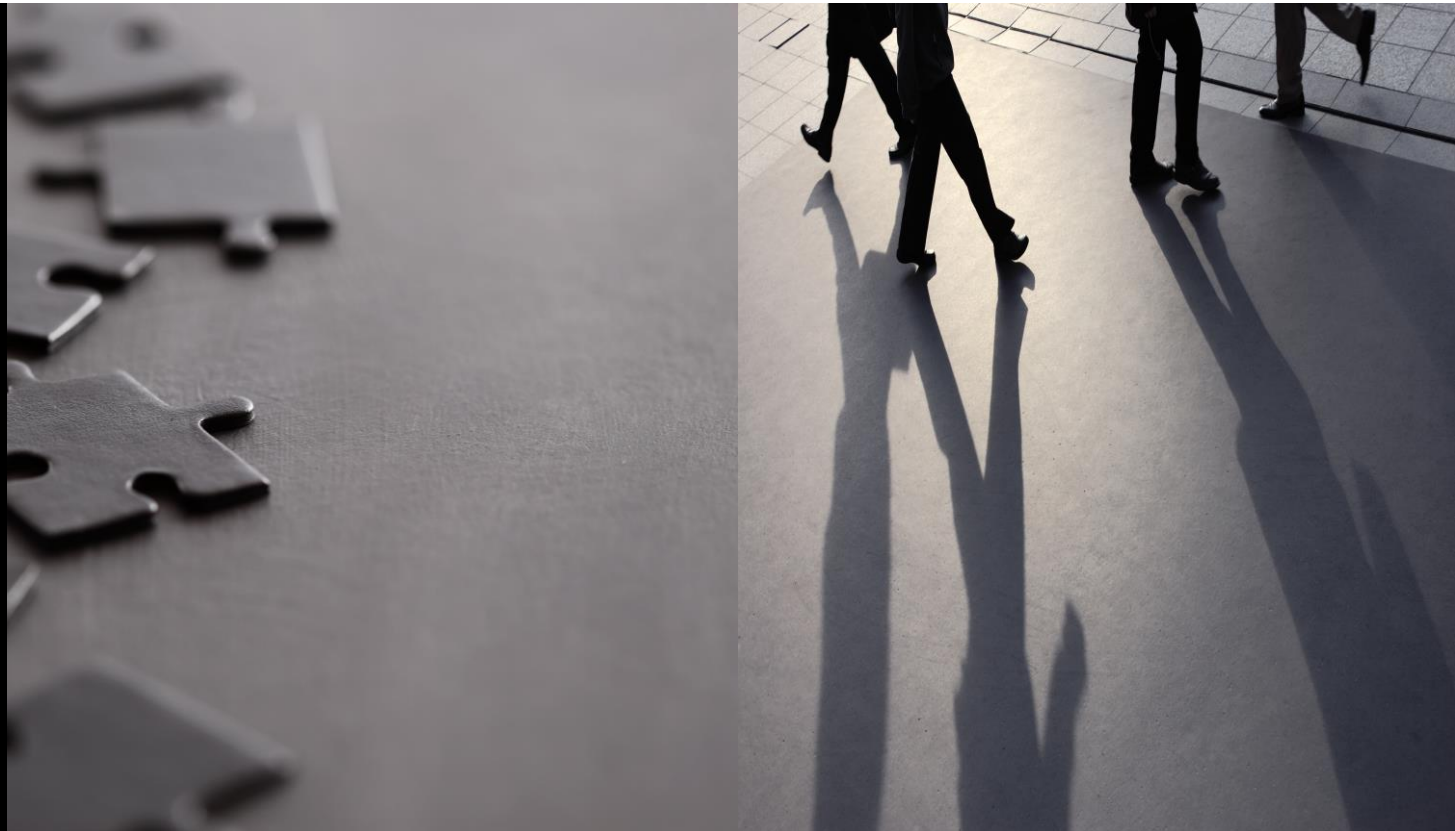
## Initial Aim of the Project:

### 1. Data collection =

Quantify the population of adults with SMI living with aging parents/caregivers in SMC

### 2. Existing Literature

### 3. Preliminary Needs Assessment



# THERE WAS NO DATA

## Data Problems

1. Incomplete
2. Unreliable
3. Survey-based
4. Non-specific
5. NO EHR

## Data Attempts in San Mateo County

Aging caregivers caring for adult children with SMI:

1. S4SH Survey (2022): **68±**
2. NAMI Survey (2023): **15**

Adult recipients with parent providers:

3. IHSS (2023): **288**

# USING Z-CODES TO DOCUMENT THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH (SDOH)

## What are the SDoH?

- Non-medical factors that influence health outcomes
- Conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, age...shaping the conditions of daily life (WHO, 2022)
- 80% of health outcomes can be related to SDoH factors (Heidari et al., 2023)

## What are Z-Codes?

- Adopted by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1990 and becoming part of the ICD-10
- Z-Codes were developed by the CMS in 2015 to track the SDoH
- Z-Codes for SDoH: Z55-Z65
- Top (5): Z59\*, Z63, Z56, Z60, Z55

# USING Z-CODES: WHY DOES THIS MATTER FOR SMC?

## Homeless Populations

- P.I.T. Count, 2024: In CA, >186, 000 homeless– 8% higher than 2022
- P.I.T. Count, 2024: In SMC, >2,130 homeless– 18% higher than 2022

## Invisible Populations

- Adults with SMI living with aging parents/caregivers are at an extremely high risk for future homelessness dependent on caregiver stability
- Invisible populations are not being documented
- Z-Codes + ICD codes, using EHR, can produce data on housing status (SDoH) & mental health conditions county-wide.

# Z-CODES: BARRIERS & BENEFITS

## BARRIERS

- Confusion about who can use them
- Not mandatory
- Time constraints
- Underutilized
- EHR
- Not billable

## BENEFITS

- *DATA, DATA, DATA*
- Already available to use
- Identify and plan for future needs
- Reduce healthcare costs
- Identify upstream factors for prevention
- Data can be used for fund allocation

# WHAT IF WE MAKE IT MANDATORY TO DOCUMENT JUST ONE?

## HOUSING STATUS (Z59)

### By Documenting Housing Status, we can:

- Eliminate barriers to use Z-Codes
- More accurately track data on homelessness and housing instability in SMC
- Plan for now, Anticipate future needs
- Be a leading example for other counties in CA

### Z59: Problems Related to Housing (and economic circumstances):

- Z59.0: Homeless
- Z59.1: Inadequate Housing
- Z59.3: Problems related living in a residential institution
- Z59.8: Other problems related to housing
  - Z59.811: Housing Instability, Housed with risk for Homelessness
    - **\*\*Sub Specifier: Dependent Adult with Disability Living with Aging Caregiver**



# IN CLOSING

- Transitioning to a county-wide EHR system is a unique opportunity for SMC
- Mandating the use of Z-Codes to document housing status at every community patient encounter can produce more accurate and current data for county/state use
- CMS, CalAIMS will eventually require Z-Code use
- By 2026, all mental health plans in CA will be based on data ([mentalhealth.ca.gov](https://www.mentalhealth.ca.gov), 2024)
- Z-Codes are ready to use and contain a wealth of social health information



**MOST IMPORTANTLY:**

**MANDATING THE USE OF Z-CODES TO DOCUMENT HOUSING STATUS IN SMC WILL HELP REDUCE AND PREVENT FUTURE HOMELESSNESS AND IDENTIFY VULNERABLE AND INVISIBLE POPULATIONS AT HIGH RISK FOR HOUSING INSTABILITY.**



# THANK YOU

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