

TOP TIPS FOR ANALYSING SERVICE DATA



When legal assistance organisations deliver a service to a client, they record data about that client, the problems they present with, the service provided to the client, and other information relevant to the provision of the service.

This data is a rich source of information that, if analysed carefully, can be harnessed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of legal assistance service delivery.

Not all services are equal

As with all service provision, some types of services require far more resource input than others. The proportion of all services that are of a specific type is not, therefore, the proportion of resources dedicated to that service type. Also, services can be of the same type, but still vary greatly in terms of workload, time, skills or resources required to deliver them. Nevertheless, analysing by service type can be useful to understanding variations in service provision by client group and area of law.

One service can cover more than one type of legal problem

A client can receive one service for multiple legal issues. Not all Management information systems are set up to capture multiple legal problem types. If multiple problem types are recorded, some systems identify a 'primary' or 'main' problem type while others do not. In some settings, a client presenting with multiple problems may be referred internally and multiple services will be recorded as a result. In other settings, that client might be recorded as having received only one service.

Definitions matter

It is important to compare like with like. When looking at data from different entities, even different departments within an organisation, check with users of the system what they understand by the terminology. Even slightly different definitions can invalidate comparisons.

- Is it 'regional/rural' or 'rural/remote', and what is the difference?
- Is it 'any language', or 'main language spoken at home'?
- Is it household income or personal income? Before or after tax?

Some priority client groups may be more accurate counts than others

To qualify for some service types, providers may require a client to belong to a specific priority client group. There may be less incentive to capture belonging to other priority groups. The quality of data on belonging to multiple groups will therefore vary, especially when multiple questions or particularly sensitive questions are required.

Depending on system setup, it can also be technically tricky to obtain a count of clients belonging to any priority client group, no priority client group or multiple client priority groups.

Services, clients, problems, matter types. What is being measured?

A client can receive one service for one problem, one service for multiple problems, or multiple services for one problem. The same client can later receive a service for a different problem.

Depending on the purpose of the analysis, counts of services, or counts of clients, or counts of problems may be more appropriate.

The use of unique identifiers (client ID and service ID), to identify multiple problems, multiple services and returning clients allows for greater flexibility and more insightful analysis of service data.

Totals and percentages . . . of what base?

Not all information is required to be recorded for each client, service or problem. For example, the financial status of a client may be recorded for some services but not others. Analysis should only include those records where the relevant information is expected to be recorded.

Percentages should be calculated on these records only, and the total count of services used in the calculation specified. For example, when calculating the percentage of clients that are financially disadvantaged, the base for the calculation should only include those service types for which this information is recorded.

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Increases in services/clients are not always evidence of increasing demand

When counts of a particular service or client type increase, it is tempting to conclude this is evidence of increasing demand. However, variations in counts will also reflect organisational decisions about resource allocation. In a context of limited resources and an operating environment where services are targeted at specific areas of law or client groups, the overall profile of services delivered will largely reflect the nature and extent of what is actually offered and available to potential clients.

Trends in services delivered should therefore be interpreted in the context of any changes to service provision.

Legal problem or matter type can change between services and over time

During the course of a client's pathway through legal assistance, the problem/matter types for which service(s) are provided can change. As further or different information is collected about the legal issue, the assessment of the precise matter type may change, and/or additional matter types may arise or become apparent. This can make it challenging to identify which services were provided in response to the original legal issue, and the pathways followed by each client.



Client characteristics may not be concurrent to the service

Some systems keep client records separate from service records. When a new service record is started for a returning client, this can be linked to an existing client record. If the client information is not updated, it may be out of date at the time of the new service.

If the client record is updated, the system may overwrite the previous client record. This means that when analysing previous services, only the most recent client characteristics will be available, not the client characteristics as they were at the time the service was provided. This could explain, for example, why a service for a child appears to have been provided to an adult.

Client privacy in the data

When service data is extracted from a client information system to be used for research purposes, steps should be taken to minimise risks to client privacy.

- Identifying details of the client such as their name and contact details should be removed.
- Indirect identifiers may be modified. For example, client reference numbers can be changed so that they can no longer be directly linked back to personal details but remain a unique identifier for each client.
- Data may be grouped together so less precise characteristics are available for each individual, such as age into age groups or full date of birth into year of birth.

Client privacy in analysis and reporting

Combining individual client or service records to report on aggregated groups of clients, problems or services, not only means the findings reflect the bigger picture of service provision, but also ensures individual clients and/or staff members cannot be identified in the reporting.

Aggregation can take place at different levels: at the national level, the jurisdictional level, the service provider level, across or within service providers, or within elements of service provision such as client type, service type or legal problem type.

The minimum number of cases on which findings can be presented will depend on the circumstances.

Legal need is not what walks in the door

Counts of clients or services delivered do not indicate the amount of legal need in a community as not everyone that has legal need receives a legal assistance service.

This is because not everyone is aware they have a legal problem, or that services are available to assist them. Further, accessible services may not be available for some types of client or legal problem, for policy, operational or resourcing reasons.

The profile of clients of services delivered is therefore not just a reflection of the underlying legal need in the community, but also the legal capability of the community to access services, and the nature and resourcing of the services available.