

## GROUNDED:

### Gathering Robust Intelligence for the Digital Age of Policymaking



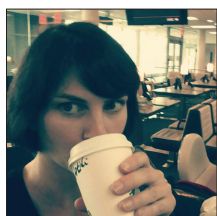
**SARAH  
SCHULMAN**



**DANIELA  
KRAEMER**



**JONAS  
PIET**



**NATALIE  
NAPIER**

As 'month 13' for Canada's Syrian refugee arrivals comes and goes, and the year of government support comes to an end, what information will the Canadian government have to make evidence-based decisions to help move their lives forward?

Or, as the homeless population ages, what intelligence will assist the government to develop the supports these folks need? How will it serve people like Dustin, age 55, on and off the streets since he was 10, with keys to a house, but often preferring to sleep rough with friends?

#### **Grounded: A real-time feedback loop**

Grounded is a data service connecting policy makers and organizational leaders with the people using and experiencing services. By logging into the Grounded

website, decision makers find aggregated qualitative data of individuals' daily experiences, including ratings of services and perceived barriers and enablers.

The data can be used to inform policy briefs, better target procurement, and improve training and professional development for service delivery staff.

Grounded adds another level of intelligence to the social policy toolkit.

#### **The inspiration: Shadowing street-involved adults on service visits**

The idea for Grounded comes from six-months shadowing over 50 street-involved adults in downtown Toronto, and beta-testing the data service with municipal, provincial, and federal policy makers.

In 2015-2016 InWithForward (IWF), a social service design agency, partnered with Toronto's West Neighbourhood House (West NH) to develop new social supports for street-involved adults. When IWF researchers started shadowing drop-in centre users as they engaged with housing, health, justice, employment, and other social services, stories surfaced that offered a human understanding of policy implementation gaps.

For example: Frank, an avid reader in his 50s who is interested in black holes and theoretical physics. Frank has been living on the streets for over 20 years. When Frank decided 2016 was the year he would get housing, an IWF researcher accompanied him to a housing office. What we learned was surprising – not only was Frank ineligible to receive housing support (he had not filed taxes in years, a prerequisite), but the housing worker was using Craigslist – a public website Frank could easily use himself. Frank was frustrated and spent the rest of the afternoon drinking.

#### **No ongoing information pipeline from the streets to decision-makers**

To help us develop our Grounded prototype, we tested it with 60 civil servants in Toronto and Ottawa. More than 40 agreed with the statement: "too many policy makers feel removed from the people on-the-ground, and lack a feedback loop of how policies and programs are playing out." Civil servants told us they would like to

be better connected to the beneficiaries of their services. They want to make stronger evidenced-based decisions when working to resolve social problems.

Chief executives and senior level directors of six large service delivery organizations also lamented that in their organizations data is perceived as a performance management tool, rather than as a learning tool. They told us that they wish to create internal systems and routines to more rigorously listen to service users, to help them tweak programs based on user feedback.

Lastly, the folks whose lives we are working to change, people like Dustin and Frank, say that they lack an avenue to input their stories; a way to provide real-on-the-ground intelligence that could enable responsive action.

#### **What's the problem Grounded is trying to solve?**

Many policymakers and organizational leaders in the social policy space have no choice but to make some decisions blind. There is a dearth of real-time data to help learn about the issues facing certain population groups, and identify where and how to best intervene.

Grounded addresses three major limitations with the existing data supply:

*a. The quality of quantitative data from the social service sector is often poor*

The quality of existing quantitative data in the social service sector is rife with inaccuracies, stemming from human error, norming biases, data collectors who need to achieve preset targets, and a lack of rigour. Our work at several drop-in centres revealed a range of reliability and validity errors with officially reported statistics. Because funding is often linked to outputs like service usage, organizations are incentivized to report high volumes. Staff tend to perceive data collection as an accountability tool versus a practice improvement tool.

*b. Outliers are missing from existing datasets*

Outliers like Dustin are often left out of census data and other representative samples. They can be hard to track down, and their data is often removed from samples so as not to skew results. Without an explicit strategy to go after outliers, new policies and interventions are unlikely to work for the groups with the highest

## Program Evaluation

references and methodological notes.

On the Grounded website data will be organized around themes (e.g. addiction, grief), around issue areas (e.g. health, justice, housing), around service types (e.g. shelters, dental services), and demographic features. Users of the site can choose to read individual entries and watch media files; or view aggregated totals of ratings and barriers experienced. Results of testing early prototypes can be viewed here: <https://inouttoronto.wordpress.com/grounded-data-with-a-story/>.

### Grounded Intelligence Can Effect Change

Grounded is an innovative approach that can prompt change by bringing qualitative data into the social policy toolkit.


Commissioned grounded datasets will help departments and organizations overcome red tape such as ethics approvals for qualitative data collection, or the hardship of recruiting people on the ground.

For service delivery organizations, Grounded gives staff access to fresh perspectives on their beneficiaries.

For marginalized folks, Grounded offers some paid work and skill-building opportunities. Moreover, Grounded validates their experiences - they see that their perspectives matter to policy and program development.

For social services, we argue that accessible quality intelligence of users' needs and experiences will lead to improvement in programs and policies. We believe programs and policies developed with information from the very people who use them will help to bring about the accessible supports individuals require.

### What's next?

While the first prototype focused on the everyday experiences of street-involved adults like Frank and Dustin, Grounded seeks to grow its data sets in its next iteration. In 2017 we are going to be beta-testing Grounded 2.0. We are seeking 3 or 4 partners, and are especially interested in working closely with Newcomers as well as Indigenous Youth and folks with addictions. 

**DR. SARAH SCHULMAN**, FOUNDING PARTNER AND SOCIAL SCIENCE LEAD, INWITHFORWARD. **DR. DANIELA KRAEMER** IS LEAD ANTHROPOLOGIST [DANIELA@INWITHFORWARD.COM](mailto:DANIELA@INWITHFORWARD.COM), INWITHFORWARD, **JONAS PIET**, DIRECTOR AND SERVICE DESIGN LEAD, INWITHFORWARD, **NATALIE NAPIER**, LEAD RECRUITER, INWITHFORWARD. [WWW.INWITHFORWARD.COM](http://WWW.INWITHFORWARD.COM)



Beta testing grounded with federal civil servants

needs. These are often also the groups who are most costly for the system.

#### *c. Problem focused, not solution focused*

Quantitative data tells us if a service is being used or not, it does not offer insight into motivations, needs, preferences, and experiences. As such, quantitative data has to be combined with qualitative data to be more actionable – to reveal information about how the problem might best be solved. It is from this combination of data types that we learn not only the fact that Dustin does not seek medical help until he has to go to emergency, but why Dustin doesn't go to his GP.

### If quantitative data is so limited, what intelligence does Grounded offer?

Grounded data seeks to answer three types of questions: (1) how does a service or program work/not work, (2) for whom does a service or program work/not work, and (3) why?

Grounded offers insight about:

#### *a. Service Journeys of groups.*

Which services do people interact with, when, and how do they rate their experiences? What are the enablers and barriers individuals encounter as they use services and try to access support? Qualitative data offers a more global view of a person in context thereby illuminating insights individuals may neglect to share.

#### *b. The motivations, preferences, and aspirations of individuals.*

How do people define a good outcome for themselves? What are their unmet needs and wants? How do their service interactions shape their motivations and preferences?

#### *c. The clever solutions.*

For example: how are homeless/underhoused individuals' making do? What are their strategies and ways around challenges? This kind of data gives us insights upon which we can resolve the cracks people are falling through and the elements that are misused.

### How does Grounded work?

We envision the future of Grounded as a subscription service. In the meantime we are building our database through commissioned research. Government Departments and organizations working on a particular policy can commission Grounded to conduct research on a specific group or a social issue.

On the backend, Grounded works through the creation of new roles, tools and a database.

**New roles:** Data for Grounded is collected by Grounded Recorders. Recorders are folks from the population we are researching. They are trained and paid to help their peers input and record their experiences with social services. The advantage of hiring and training members of the population group under research is that the qualitative data they collect is real user experience in real time, not reported experiences filtered through surveys, focus groups or interviewer biases.

**New tools:** A specially designed notebook, or an app to submit notes, photos, and location-based information using mobile phones or a computer.

**New database:** A new database will enable researchers, on the back-end, to code sections by theme, add searchable tags and keywords, link entries, and include