Big data for categorizing people should be used with caution, expert says

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"You could match the data of homeless people and say a large number are alcoholics, so they should be targeted with alcohol rehabilitation, but what caused their situation is never uncovered.

"We need caution to ensure that we aren't going to waste resources and insult and stigmatise groups of people."

Dr Gillingham collaborated with computational sociologist Timothy Graham of UQ's School of Social Science to deliver a critical perspective on the potential impact of big data in human services.

He said there had already been contemplation in New Zealand of using databases to predict the likelihood of someone being a child abuser.

Yet preliminary exploration found holes in the data, potential for misjudgements and not a great deal of insight compared to what was already known.

"Existing tools already tell us the most likely perpetrators, without spending millions of dollars," Dr Gillingham said.

"The phenomenal cost – and whether that money could be better spent on services – is something that is quite often overlooked."

Dr Gillingham used a personal example to illustrate how big data and predictive modelling could lead to wasted resources and wrongful targeting.

"I have characteristics that align with people who enjoy golf," he said.

"I'm constantly bombarded with advertising at home and online with golfing products.

"But the actual truth is that I hate golf, absolutely hate it."

Dr Gillingham warned that big data could result in
patterns that distracted from core issues and could be open to politically-influenced interpretation.

Big Data in Social Welfare is published in journal *Australian Social Work*.


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