

THE INTERSECTION OF HOMELESSNESS, RACE, AND THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Systemic racism and racial injustice in the USA have recently been put into a long-due spotlight. For years, the National Alliance to End Homelessness have been working on the links between racial disparities and homelessness. In a context where Black people are dying of the coronavirus at twice the rate of Whites in the US, and where the Black community is disproportionately affected by homelessness, this article makes some crucial points about the links between homelessness and race which would also need urgent addressing in the EU too.



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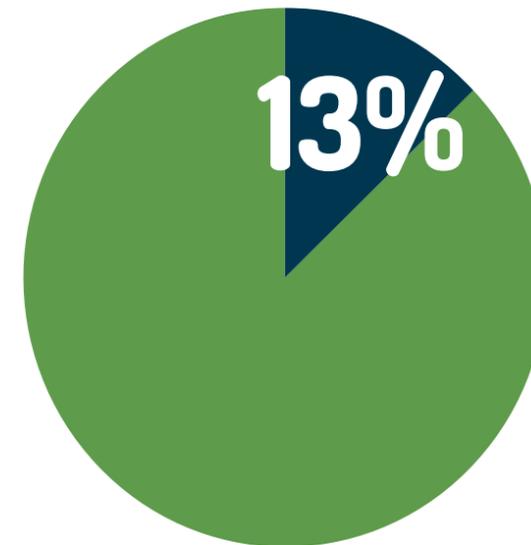
Racial injustice has rightfully gained a spot on the national agenda in the U.S. Sparked by a series of videos of Black people dying at the hands of law enforcement, people of all colors have taken to the streets in cities and towns across the country and around the world to advocate for racial equity. At the same time, the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 and the recession on communities of color has placed a spotlight on existing racial disparities that have spanned every segment of life, including health, education, employment and housing. Homelessness is a part of this story.

HOMELESSNESS AND RACE IN THE U.S.

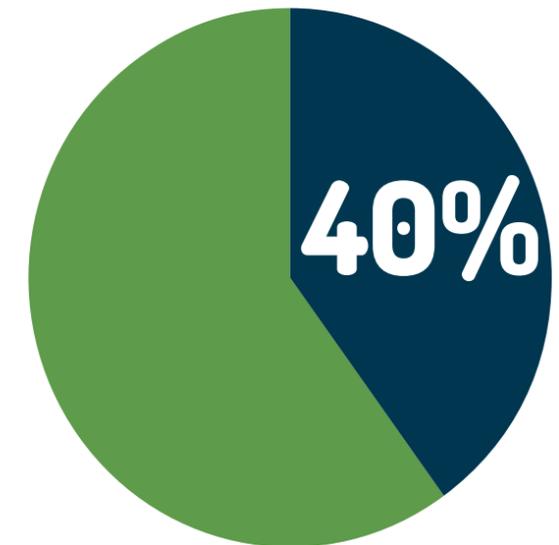
Most minority groups, especially African Americans and Indigenous people, experience homelessness at higher rates than Whites, largely due to long-standing historical and structural racism. The most striking disparity can be found among African Americans, who represent 13 percent of the general population but account for 40 percent of people experiencing homelessness and more than 50 percent of homeless families with children.

These disparate numbers have begun to spur action in recent years at both the national and local levels. The Center for Social Innovation launched Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities (SPARC) in 2016 to study and respond to racial disparities in homelessness. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) started to award points for addressing racial inequity in the Continuum of Care (CoC) funding application, and released an analysis tool on race/ethnicity and homelessness.

African Americans in the US



**GENERAL
POPULATION**



**HOMELESS
POPULATION**

There is still much more work to be done, but the field has started to grapple with racial inequity and homelessness in a more aggressive way. Now there are credible fears that these disproportionalities could worsen as the nation faces a two-part crisis: 1) the COVID-19 public health emergency; and 2) a recession brought on by the pandemic.



“At the beginning of the crisis, Black people were the racial/ethnic group most likely to be living in shelters [...] and Black and Latinx people are more likely to experience evictions [in the post-Covid recession].”

PART 1 OF THE CRISIS: THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY

Multiple factors have raised concerns that the public health crisis is disproportionately impacting people of color experiencing homelessness.

General Population Disparities. In general, the COVID-19 pandemic is not affecting all communities the same way. The most current data show that Black people are dying of the coronavirus at twice the rate of Whites. A tracking project by the *Atlantic* found that out of the top five U.S. counties with the highest death rates, three of them have majority Black populations. Black people are also 4.7 times more likely to be hospitalized due to COVID-19, followed by Latinx populations. Indigenous groups have the highest rates of hospitalizations at 5 times greater than Whites.

Discriminatory Practices. Due to discriminatory practices like red-lining, certain minority populations have oftentimes been relegated to substandard housing and underserved areas with limited access to nutritious food, quality education, and health care. These factors largely account for severe illness and higher death rates among Black and Brown groups during public health crises. Added to this is the fact that minority groups are disproportionately represented in the service industry. They are thus unable to stay at home and shelter in place if they wish to maintain an income, and thus disproportionately exposed to the virus. In other words, in line with the disproportionality we see in homelessness, COVID-19 poses a higher risk to Black and Brown communities because of underlying health, social, and economic disparities rooted in historical and structural racism.



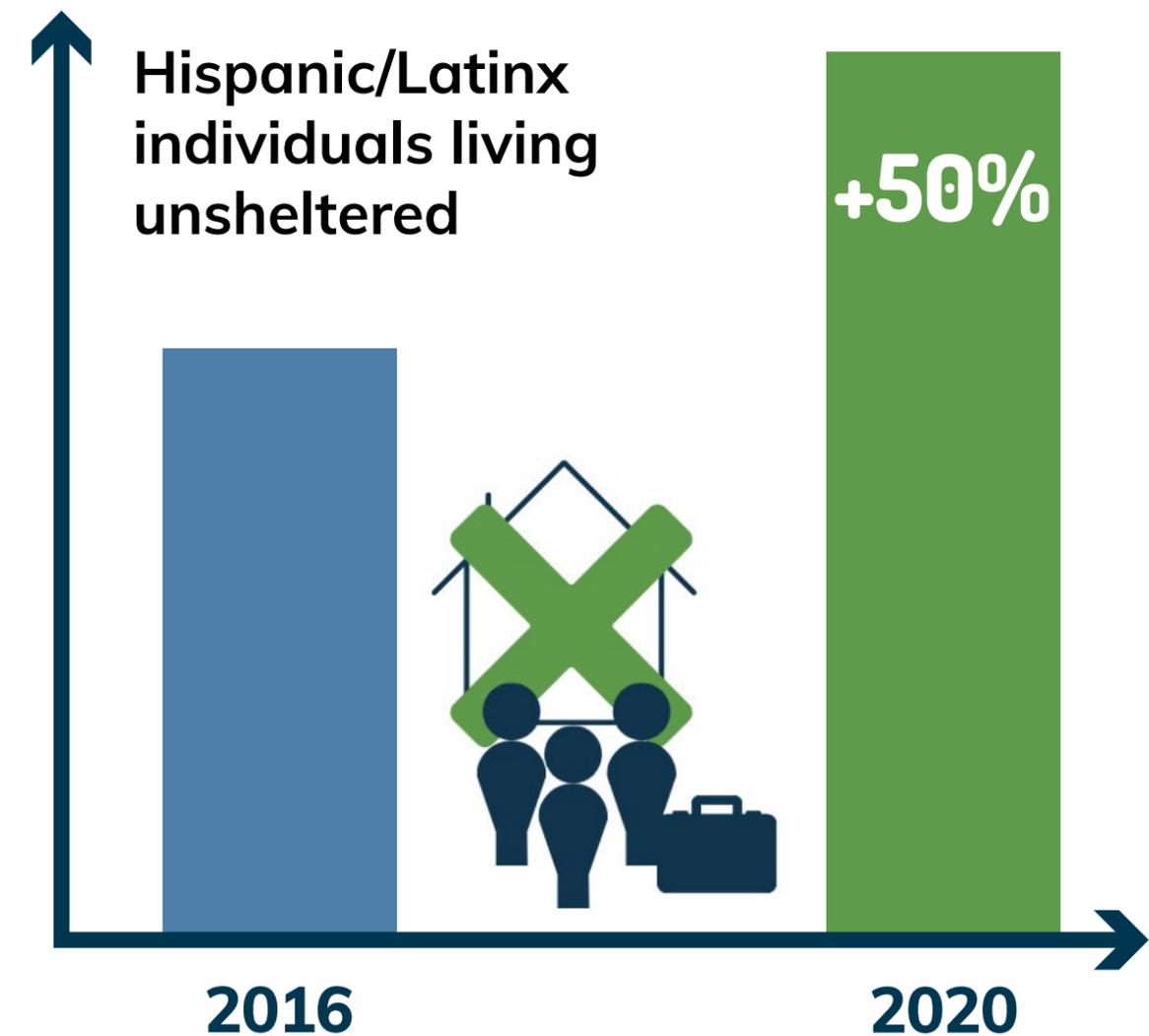
Racial Disproportionality in Shelter. At the beginning of the crisis, Black people were the racial/ethnic group most likely to be living in shelters. Every 3 out of 4 were in these often congregate and crowded settings. Under such circumstances, efforts to contain infection such as isolation, social distancing, and cleanliness are difficult and these challenges disproportionately affect Black people. Surveys conducted by the Alliance suggest that most communities have been placing some people from shelters in private hotel and motel rooms (many hotels/motels are vacant due to pandemic-related reductions in travel and tourism). This is reducing crowding at shelters and allowing more space between beds, but it is yet to be determined how effective this measure has been in reducing racial disparities in outcomes.

Racial Disproportionality among People Who Are Unsheltered. Of the nation's major racial/ethnic groups, Indigenous people are most likely to be unsheltered—56 percent are sleeping on sidewalks and other locations not meant for human habitation. Many tribal areas do not have emergency shelters and many Indigenous people avoid mainstream shelters in urban areas because they believe them to be overcrowded and dangerous.

The number of unsheltered people who are Hispanic/Latino is growing faster than that of any other racial/ethnic group. Since 2016, there has been a 50 percent increase in the number of Hispanic/Latino individuals living unsheltered. Recent changes to immigration policy could be a factor. Researchers and advocates note that those who are undocumented fear participating in services including those related to homelessness.

Being unsheltered presents different health challenges than those which exist for those in shelter. Homeless service providers are less likely to reach unsheltered people. Like shelters, encampments

can be crowded congregate settings. Lack of access to water for bathing and handwashing poses risks for the spread of COVID-19. In response to the crisis, some communities (exact numbers are unknown) are targeting efforts to unsheltered people, placing them in isolation sites, installing handwashing stations, or providing other supplies. Any successes/failures in reaching and serving unsheltered individuals could have significant implications for Indigenous and Hispanic/Latino people.



Impact of COVID-19 on Homeless Population. Nationally, there do not appear to be unusually high numbers of cases or deaths among people experiencing homelessness. Provider interventions in shelters could be helping. There is speculation that being outdoors protects unsheltered people. However certain challenges limit our knowledge of the full story—testing is not widely available, racial/demographic information is often missing, and some agencies fail to collect or share data. It is possible that the situation is worse than we think or that the worst is yet to come.

PART 2 OF THE CRISIS: THE ECONOMIC RECESSION

The National Picture. The United States entered a recession in February 2020. In March 2020, various state and local governments began implementing lockdown, quarantine, or stay-at-home policies that shuttered businesses and slowed economic activities, complicating the economic recovery. Unemployment rates are elevated. As a result, far too many Americans struggle to pay the rent and are at-risk of eviction and homelessness. Government interventions for these challenges exist, but they have been inconsistent and can vary by state.

Who Is Affected? During the pandemic, jobs losses have disproportionately impacted groups that were already facing many socioeconomic barriers. According to recent unemployment reports, Black and Latinx people have higher unemployment rates at 16.1% and 16.7% compared to the national average of 12.9% (and 12.1% of Whites). These groups are feeling disproportionate pain from the unemployment crisis. Similarly, these groups are more likely to experience evictions.

When the worst happens, many people rely on family and friends for resources or a place to stay. Some get government assistance. However, research suggests that increases in unemployment rates and evictions could lead to significant increases in homelessness.

Many homeless service providers are already reporting increased requests for assistance and they anticipate influxes of new clients that could overwhelm their systems. Whether the federal government will step-in to provide additional resources for these challenges is unclear. What is clear is that racial economic gaps will likely continue if the needs of the most vulnerable communities are not addressed.

MOVING FORWARD

Clearly, at this moment in which a pandemic, a recession and homelessness have collided, certain racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. are extremely vulnerable. In particular, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Indigenous people are disproportionately affected by the compounding problems.

The homelessness system, strained to respond in the best of time, is challenged by this moment. But while there are certainly outside/structural factors in play, the homelessness system, itself, is not exempt from racism, implicit bias and disparities. At this moment of crisis, homelessness programs and systems, themselves, have a significant and direct responsibility to ensure that they are not adding to the problem by having a disparate impact on people based on their race or ethnicity.



A basic first step in eliminating disparities is to collect, analyze and act on data through a racialized lens – as many communities have started to do (even before COVID-19). Racial equity should be a part of the homelessness system’s response to the pandemic and data analysis can help determine if and where disparities exist and what might be done about them.

In response to the pandemic, for example, the National Alliance to End Homelessness’ Racial Equity Network (REN), a group of local and state system and program leaders and advocates, joined together to identify areas of disparity and advance solutions. The REN had already developed a racial equity tool to help communities collect and analyze data to identify disparities. It added a section on COVID-19 to help communities prioritize racial equity and integrate this work into their COVID-19 responses. Additional tools and resources have been developed by federal and national partners, such as the *Framework for an Equitable COVID-19 Homeless Response*, which provides guidance to governments on using federal resources in an equitable way to address the pandemic. The Framework calls for communities to apply a racial lens to all COVID-19 activities, including things such as serving the highest need (and, therefore, most likely to be people of color) people first; involving people of color with lived experience in planning and implementation, and shaping culturally responsive approaches.

Other responses among systems have included analysis of access to testing, reshaping programs to meet community needs and rethinking outreach to service those who are unsheltered and less likely to receive information about COVID-19.

Racism is a public health, housing, and economic issue in the U.S. If systems to support the most vulnerable people – like the homelessness system -- fail to address racism head on, outcomes will worsen and Black and Brown communities will continue to bear the brunt of crises like the pandemic and the recession.

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