



Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities (SPARC)
Columbus, Ohio
Initial Findings from Quantitative and Qualitative Research

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Homelessness in the United States is a national tragedy, perpetuated by decades of bad public policy, inadequate funding, negative stereotypes, and public fatigue. The causes of homelessness have often been misunderstood, with the general public ascribing individual vulnerabilities as the primary determinants of who becomes homeless. While these may play a role, they do not explain the scope or the root of the problem. Homelessness is fundamentally a structural issue—a result of a chronic lack of affordable housing, economic immobility, and systemic racism.

People of color are dramatically more likely than White people to experience homelessness in the United States. This is no accident, but a result of centuries of structural racism that have excluded historically oppressed people—particularly Black Americans and Native Americans—from equal access to housing, community supports, and opportunities for economic mobility.

The Center for Social Innovation (C4) launched Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities (SPARC) in 2016 in response to overwhelming evidence that people of color were dramatically overrepresented in the nation’s homeless population—across the country and regardless of jurisdiction. Since then, SPARC has launched mixed

methods research and action in six communities to better understand how people are experiencing systemic racism in relation to homelessness, and to leverage that knowledge toward systems transformation.

From November 28th to December 2nd of 2016, SPARC partnered with the Community Shelter Board and other service providers in Columbus, Ohio to collect qualitative and quantitative data to examine the racial dimensions of homelessness in the area. Data collection included:

- Individual interviews with 24 people of color experiencing homelessness
- Three focus groups of consumers of color, providers of color, and stakeholders
- Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data from fiscal years 2014 - 2016 covering 32,754 client records
- An online survey of 100 homeless service providers

This report presents the major findings from the research in Columbus and recommend tangible steps towards a response system grounded in racial equity.

Findings

Based on quantitative and qualitative analyses conducted by the SPARC team, the data presented below show demographics of all people served by the homeless service systems in SPARC communities; high level findings from the provider workforce survey; and major themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews and focus groups.

Quantitative Data

Demographics

Table 1 compares the racial/ethnic breakdown of the general population, the population in poverty, the population in

deep poverty, and the homeless population.

Table 1. Race of people in the HMIS system compared to those in poverty, deep poverty, and in the general population in Franklin County, Ohio

Race	Total de-duplicated Percent, HMIS 2014-2016 ^a	Percent of Deep Poverty Level Population 2015 ^b	Percent of Poverty Level Population 2015 ^c	Percent of population 2015 ^d
Black	64.9%	39.3%	39.9%	22.3%
White	33.5%	47.7%	48.2%	71.3%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	.07%	0.3%	0.4%	0.2%
Asian	0.3%	4.5%	3.5%	4.4%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.0%	0%	0.04%
Other or Multiple	N/A	5.7%	5.6%	3.8%
Hispanic/Latinx	3.9%	20.5%	8.1%	5.2%

^a Data includes PSH, so some clients did not experience homelessness during the 3-year period, but were homeless upon admission to PSH; ^b ACS 5yr 2015, Less than 50% federal poverty level; ^c ACS 5yr 2015, Less than 100% federal poverty level; ^d ACS 5yr 2015 Total



In Columbus/Franklin, County, Black individuals are disproportionately represented in the homeless population (64.9%) compared to their proportion of the general population (22.3%), the population in poverty (39.9%), and the population in deep poverty (39.3%) (See Table 1).

Analysis of **entry and exit locations** revealed differences by race and ethnicity. Black individuals entered an emergency shelter or street outreach program from a doubled-up situation at a higher rate than White or Hispanic/Latinx[†] individuals.

Forty-one percent of Black clients entered a homeless service project from doubling up, compared to 28.7% of Whites. Just below a third (32.4%) of Hispanic/Latinx individuals entered from doubling up.

White, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx individuals varied little in the rate *exiting* to doubled up situations from an emergency shelter or street outreach program. Individuals exited into doubling up at rates of 36.0%, 34.8%, and 37.0%, respectively.

White individuals exited back into homelessness from emergency shelter or street outreach at a greater rate than Black and Hispanic/Latinx individuals. A quarter (25.4%) of White clients exited from those programs into homelessness, compared to 15.3% of Black clients and 17.5% of Hispanic/Latinx clients.

White individuals exited emergency shelter or street outreach into permanent housing at a lower rate. Compared to 22.9% of White individuals, 38.0% of Black individuals and 32.4% of Hispanic/Latinx individuals exited into permanent housing without subsidy.

Predictors of exiting into homelessness

Multivariate logistic regressions were conducted to examine predictors associated with **exiting the HMIS system into homelessness**. Project exit indicates the end of a client's participation with an HMIS project (e.g., Emergency

Shelter, Street Outreach, Safe Haven, Transitional Housing, Rapid Re-housing). Use of this data element may vary depending on project type. "Exiting into homelessness" means that someone left the project for a place not meant for human habitation or for emergency shelter (including motel with a voucher).

Results of a logistic regression across the entire HMIS dataset indicated that Asian individuals (n=51) were more than two times more likely to exit into a homeless living situation (OR = 2.21, $p < .01$) than White individuals. This finding should be interpreted with caution given the small sample size of Asian clients. In contrast, individuals who were Black were 67% less likely to end up in a homeless living situation than White individuals (OR = 0.60, $p < .01$). Other racial/ethnic groups were not significantly associated with this exiting into homelessness (see Table 2).

A second logistic regression examined other variables

Table 2. Race as a Predictor of Homelessness at Exit Among Clients in HMIS system (N=32,639)

	Logistic Regression Model Parameters			
	B	Wald $\chi^2(1)$	OR	95% CI
Race***				
Black	-0.51	159.23**	0.60	[0.55, 0.65]
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.32	2.93	1.38	[0.37, 2.00]
Asian	0.79	8.69**	2.21	[1.30, 3.73]
Native Hawaiian	0.17	0.20	1.19	[0.56, 2.51]
Hispanic	-0.14	1.80	0.87	[0.71, 1.07]

Note. OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

*** White is reference group

32,754 is the total number of individuals in the system; 32,639 is the number of individuals without missing values listed in the table on racial/ethnic groups.

beyond race. Having a child had the strongest effect on the likelihood of not exiting into homelessness. Clients with children were 14 times less likely to exit into homelessness. Institutional care and correctional facility as a place prior to the project entry were associated with exiting into homelessness (54% and 58% increased odds, respectively). In contrast, being in a permanent housing situation (with or without subsidy) or in transitional housing prior to the project entry decreased the odds of exiting into homelessness. Clients who were in permanent housing with subsidy were five times less likely and clients who were in a permanent housing without subsidy were almost four times less likely to exit into homelessness. Clients who were in transitional housing before entering the project were over two times less likely to exit into homelessness.

Workforce

The provider workforce survey included data from 100

[†] Latinx is a gender neutral term used in lieu of Latino or Latina.



individuals working in homeless service agencies. Among 100 provider staff who completed an online survey, 63% identified as White, 33% as Black, 4% as more than one race, and 4% as Hispanic or Latinx. Of 29 administrators, 22 identified as White (75%). Thirty-six percent of Black respondents have experienced homelessness, compared to 14% of White respondents.

Qualitative Data

Interpretation of qualitative data focused on **pathways into homelessness and barriers to exiting homelessness**.

Pathways into homelessness for people of color are best characterized relationally and are often characterized by *network impoverishment*. Barriers to exiting homelessness for people of color are almost entirely systemic and include difficulty finding employment that pays a livable wage and eviction history or felony status limiting both housing and employment options.

Pathways into Homelessness

The most striking feature of respondents' pathways into homelessness was the social dimension in their narratives. People did not come to experience homelessness simply through a lack of capital—they came to experience homelessness through fragile social networks. The fragility of these networks rests on two related deficiencies: lack of capital, and lack of emotional support. The quote below from a respondent typifies this dual collapse:

I've always been able to, "Hey man listen I need a couple hundred dollars, let me stay here for a month or two." I was going through that this whole past year, but now I don't have any more money to give nobody and it's like ... Me and my baby don't take that much space. It's not like I have three or four kids. He sleeps with me. It's just like, "Oh well you don't have no money." Well no I really don't. All my money and all my resources have been exhausted this past year...

This particular quote demonstrates a key pattern in the network fragility our team witnessed: people are not unwilling to double up or take in friends or family, but they do not have the resources to accommodate the additional household costs. Seeing this come up consistently across participating communities, SPARC has begun to refer to this as **network impoverishment**. There is no extra money anywhere in the network which results in a lack of flexibility in community-level safety nets. In other words: it's not just

that our respondents are experiencing poverty—everyone they know is experiencing poverty, too. One participant in our focus group phrased it as follows:

Also, in the African-American community, there is a lot of us that's in poverty and struggling just trying to make it. So, the people we know are struggling as bad as we are, and they can't even help themselves. So, what do you think they are going to help us, if they can't even help themselves? They are struggling day to day, just like how we are struggling day to day.

These preliminary findings suggest upstream intervention sites that are community based and focused on stabilizing fragile networks through infusions of capital—either through targeted subsidies or through flexible emergency funding. Moreover, interventions must take intergenerational trauma and poverty into account in order to effectively strengthen individual and community capacity to respond to the levels of stress to which they are systemically exposed.

Barriers to Exiting Homelessness

The most prominent barriers to exiting homelessness that our respondents identified were systemic. These often included difficulty obtaining stable employment with a living wage and difficulty securing housing due to eviction or criminal justice history. The following quote highlights the barrier of criminal justice involvement:

Now I have this felony and now I have a son so I can't do illegal things that I would normally do because I have to think every day, "If I go to jail my son goes to foster care." So trying to do things the legal way and stay out of trouble with my probation officer all of those things just led me here ultimately is pretty much what happened. I'm just like I've met with my advocate here and she found me a sponsor, and she's like, "Well we'll help you as much as we can, and as long as you're doing what you're supposed to be doing." And I'm like, "Listen ... if I could get in somewhere where I could work, it wouldn't be a problem. I can work the hours that I need to work to take care of myself and my son. The problem is actually finding a job.

These respondents' experiences are typical of many of our Columbus interviewees. Most people reported some system involvement that complicated access to housing and employment. Additionally, there were many histories of chronic underemployment; many respondents were currently employed while making use of homelessness



response services. Indeed, most respondents had significant work history and did not seem to have difficulty securing employment—they had difficulty securing employment *with a living wage*. One respondent stated:

We don't get the same shots at employment, this is my experience. We don't get the same opportunities for employment as white people. Like I have a college degree, I should never even have to worry about employment, never got the good job with the benefits. Always something temporary through a temporary agency.

Another thread that arose in several respondent narratives was the issue of eviction. Quantitative report data indicates that a large number of families (59%) are exiting programs into unsubsidized rent situations. One respondent characterized their situation as follows:

I have an eviction on my record from my last apartment because when I got

up and left I stopped paying rent and everything and it turned into an eviction so that made it hard for the shelter to help me get an apartment because that's what was supposed to happen like I was supposed to be in the family shelter and they are supposed to be able to assist me in getting housing but because I had that eviction and my credit's bad it just made it like super difficult for them to be able to do that.

We also heard from a number of respondents that they summarily walked away from housing without terminating their leases, because of violence in the home. This suggests a potential intervention site in the re-structuring of eviction appeals in cases of domestic violence or other complex situations where a person is responding inside the context of extreme stress. Again, when considering potential interventions, it will be important to think about the ways in which we can target resources towards these nested vulnerabilities.

Recommendations

Based on the quantitative and qualitative findings presented in this report, various strategies can guide organizational leaders, researchers, policy makers, and community members as they work to address racial inequity in homelessness. Because the underlying issues that drive high rates of homelessness among people of color, it is important to address them and multiple levels simultaneously. It is not possible to solve these issues at the programmatic level alone.

The recommendations presented here are ambitious and structural in nature to respond to the underlying systemic inequities that have for decades put people of color at greater risk for experiencing homelessness. Some of the recommendations are immediate and others are much longer term. Some are local, some are national. The authors fully recognize that policy makers and the general public may not fully embrace these recommendations at present and that much work will need to be done to move them all forward.

Based on the quantitative and qualitative findings presented in this report, we propose the following strategies to guide organizational leaders, researchers, policy makers, and community members as they work to address racial

inequity in homelessness:

Organizational Change

- Ensure that programs are anti-racist. Performing internal systems audits and looking at program output data by race and ethnicity for disproportionality can help target the work. In addition, staff will benefit from continuous training on the intersection of race and homelessness, on bias, and on strategies to confront racism within their work.
- Establish professional development opportunities to identify and invest in emerging leaders of color in the homelessness sector.
- Develop or adapt behavioral health interventions, domestic violence programs, and other supportive services for people of color experiencing homelessness.
- Re-framing workforce development curricula to target enhancing people's skills re: industries that are in demand (for example, a code academy) and provide livable wages with benefits.

Research



- Conduct additional research to understand the scope and needs of Hispanic/Latinx homelessness and of transgender and gender-expansive individuals.
- Conduct expanded qualitative and quantitative data collection to better understand the complicated dynamics that drive inflow, outflow, and return to homelessness for people of color, especially families with children, in the homeless services system.

Policy

- Collaborate to increase affordable housing availability. Develop new affordable housing stock through broader use of inclusionary zoning and mandatory affordable units for new developments. We need to look more deeply at both the rate of production of housing units and subsidy amounts to stabilize people within units now available.
- Introduce regulation or legislation to prevent speculators from conducting mass evictions or choosing not to renew leases of tenants, and implement and enforce existing fair housing protections.
- Increase homelessness prevention efforts, including targeted eviction prevention for people at risk of homelessness and working with connected systems—criminal justice, child welfare, and public health systems— to reduce the number

of people exiting into homelessness from sites within those systems.

- Investigate flexible subsidies. Many financial crises start as non-rent related. Respondents' initial needs were for food, car repair, or bills. This suggests that for some people, flexible subsidies could be used to avert crises that spiral into homelessness.

Individual Action

- Educate yourself, your organization, and the wider community on interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism and the facts about race and homelessness.
- Use the data emerging from work related to racial inequity to shape advocacy and public awareness strategies at the individual provider, organizational, and community levels.

Summary

These recommendations grew out of insights from the people who participated in this study—people of color experiencing homelessness—and they are grounded by the research findings. SPARC and Community Shelter Board recognize that equity-based work should not be confined to specific initiatives, but rather should be the lens through which all of the work flows. As communities develop equity approaches, they do not happen in isolation, limited to one program or one response. Instead, racial equity models need to be widely spread across systems and sectors.

Conclusion

The homelessness field stands at a crossroads: continue to use color-blind strategies to solve an entrenched social problem that disproportionately impacts people of color, or embrace a racial equity approach to addressing homelessness. At this crossroads, it is critical to understand that racial equity should not simply be another initiative or program that is implemented in the mix with other strategies. Instead, commitment to racial equity must permeate all other tactics and strategies that cities, counties, states, and the nation use to prevent and end homelessness.

Acknowledgments

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Methods



Phase I of SPARC research involved an ambitious mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) study of race and homelessness in six American communities. The study examined:

1. How rates of homelessness for people of color compare to the general population and the population of people living in deep poverty (<50% of federal poverty rate).
2. Pathways into homelessness for people of color.
3. Barriers to exiting homelessness for people of color.
4. Experiences of people of color within the homelessness response system.

SPARC communities were selected based on various criteria: geographical diversity; willingness to participate in the study and the SPARC initiative more broadly; capacity to identify a point person for HMIS data sharing; and ability to recruit individuals for qualitative interviews and focus groups.

Quantitative Methods

Quantitative data analysis is based on HMIS administrative data from the Franklin County/Columbus, OH Continuum of Care for fiscal years 2014, 2015, and 2016 (July through June). There were 32,754 clients in the analyzed dataset. For some analyses, we looked just at emergency shelter and street outreach. Multivariate logistic regressions represent all individuals in the system from 2014-2016.

To learn more about the race and ethnicity of people working in housing and homeless service programs in SPARC communities, the research team administered an online survey. A link to the survey was sent through e-mail using Continuum of Care (CoC) listservs and through agency leadership sharing it electronically with their staff. The survey was voluntary and was open to respondents through Survey Monkey for approximately one month.

SPSS Statistics 25.0 was used to run frequencies and descriptive statistics. Multivariate logistic regressions were conducted to examine predictors associated with three independent variables related to exiting the HMIS system: exiting into homelessness; exiting into permanent housing *with* a subsidy; and exiting into permanent housing *without* a subsidy. All analyses were conducted using Mplus version 8 software.¹

Qualitative Methods

The SPARC team collected 24 oral histories during one week in Columbus, OH in November-December 2016. These histories were collected entirely from people of color currently experiencing homelessness. All respondents were recruited at sites of service delivery in Columbus, although several respondents were unsheltered at the time of their interview. Participants were recruited using convenience and purposive sampling methods. During the same week, the SPARC team also facilitated three focus groups—one for people of color experiencing homelessness (clients of a family shelter), one for direct service providers of color, and one for community leaders in the housing and homeless services systems as well as adjacent systems. Data collection was guided by interview and focus group protocols the team developed.

The research team used a Grounded Theory approach² to identify themes and concepts in the data and to develop a codebook, which allows for themes and concepts to emerge organically from the transcripts, rather than approach the data with any set hypothesis. NVIVO software was used to code the transcripts and run analyses.³

Limitations

Since the team used convenience and purposive sampling strategies for the interviews and focus groups, the qualitative data may not reflect the experiences of people disconnected from services. Another limitation is the lack of a White comparison group for the interviews, which would, in future research, help shape an understanding of the differences in the experience of homelessness for White people and people of color. The majority of respondents experiencing homelessness were currently receiving services, and all service provider and stakeholder participants were currently employed in the homelessness system or connected systems. Even though participants were informed that their answers would not impact their services or employment and all reports would maintain anonymity, people may have shared less out of concern for confidentiality.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a wide-ranging set of findings that can serve as a foundation for improvements in policy, practice, and future research.

Institutional Review Board Approval

Research was conducted according to ethical standards and this study has been approved by Heartland Institutional Review Board.

References

¹ Muthén, L.K. and Muthén, B.O. (1998-2010). Mplus User's Guide. Sixth Edition. Los Angeles, CA: Muthén & Muthén.

² Charmaz, K., & Belgrave, L. (2012). Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analysis. *The SAGE handbook of interview research: The complexity of the craft*, 2, 347-365.

³ QSR International. (n.d.). NVivo product range | QSR International. Retrieved from <http://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/nvivo-products>

