Racial Inequity and Homelessness: Findings from the SPARC Study

By
JEFFREY OLIVET,
CATRIONA WILKEY,
MOLLY RICHARD,
MARC DONES,
JULIA TRIPP,
MAYA BEIT-ARIE,
SVETLANA YAMPOLSKAYA,
and
REGINA CANNON

This study examines racial inequities and homelessness in the United States through mixed methods research in eight communities. We compare the race and ethnicity of those experiencing homelessness to the general population and to people in poverty, and we also explore how race and ethnicity are associated with housing outcomes. Interviews with 195 individuals of color explore pathways into homelessness and drivers of outcomes. We find that Black/African Americans and Native Americans were the most overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness in each community, and interview data suggest that factors associated with homelessness for people of color include barriers to housing and economic mobility, racism and discrimination within homeless services, and involvement in multiple systems, including criminal justice. How race and ethnicity were associated with outcomes varied for youth, single adults, and families. We argue that researchers and policy-makers need to address homelessness with attention to racial justice.

Keywords: racism; homelessness; housing; race; ethnicity; poverty

Homelessness in the United States is a public health crisis, with at least 550,000 Americans experiencing homelessness on any given night and more than 1.4 million through the course of a year (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD] 2018a, 2018b). The most recent *Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to Congress* reports substantial racial disparities: Black/African Americans account for 40 percent of

Jeffrey Olivet is founder of jo consulting, founding member of Racial Equity Partners, and former CEO of C4 Innovations.

Catriona Wilkey is deputy director of research and evaluation at C4 Innovations.

Molly Richard is a graduate student at Vanderbilt University.

Marc Dones is executive director of National Innovation Service.

Correspondence: jo@jeffolivet.com

those experiencing homelessness, while composing 13 percent of the U.S. population; American Indian/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) compose 2.8 percent of people experiencing homelessness but only 1 percent of the U.S. population; and Hispanic and Latinx people account for 22 percent of the homeless population, compared to 18 percent of the U.S. population. In contrast, whites and Asian Americans are consistently underrepresented in the homeless population (U.S. Census Bureau 2015; HUD 2018b). A prevalence study of Native American adults found that one-third had experienced homelessness (Whitbeck, Crawford, and Sittner Hartshorn 2012); and Morton, Chávez, and Moore (2019) found a 12.2 percent prevalence rate among AI/AN young adults, three times the rate of their white peers. Fusaro, Levy, and Shaefer (2018) documented lifetime rates of homelessness of 16.8 percent for non-Hispanic Black people, 8.1 percent for Hispanics, and 4.8 percent for non-Hispanic whites.

Research has noted racial disparities in homelessness, but little research has sought to explain them or to examine whether there are additional disparities in people's experiences with homeless services, including shelters, housing programs, and other aspects of communities' homelessness response. In a systematic review of literature on the relationship between race and homelessness, Jones (2016) found that "the racial demographics of homelessness have received little attention from policy-makers" (p. 139), suggesting that more research is needed to understand the connections between structural racism and homelessness and to develop effective policy and practice solutions.

Consistent with this call, the SPARC Initiative (Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities) launched an eight-city mixed methods study in 2016 to examine structural racism and homelessness. The study aimed to (1) document racial/ethnic disproportionality among people experiencing homelessness across multiple communities to determine patterns of overrepresentation; (2) explore the experiences of people of color across pathways into homelessness, experiences with the homelessness response system, and barriers to exiting homelessness; and (3) examine racial disparities in housing outcomes. This approach

Julia Tripp is former executive director of New Start Project, and community HIV advocate, educator, and playwright.

Maya Beit-Arie is an MSW candidate at the Boston University School of Social Work.

Svetlana Yampolskaya is a research associate professor at the University of South Florida and a statistical consultant at C4 Innovations.

Regina Cannon is chief equity and impact officer at C4 Innovations.

elucidates how societal structures contribute to racial disparities in homelessness and how homelessness response systems may perpetuate those inequities. The authors of this article include the multiracial team that developed and implemented the SPARC initiative. This article represents initial findings from the 2016 study.

Our study is informed by critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado and Stefancic 2001), a framework to examine the implicit and explicit ways racism impacts social problems. CRT acknowledges that despite civil rights progress, white privilege and power continue to be maintained through structural forces. Through this lens, the current study is grounded on an a priori recognition of the influence of structural racism on homelessness. We do not ask whether racism is related to homelessness, but instead aim to understand how racism and discrimination influence people's trajectories. We do so by centering the voices of people of color and interpreting racial/ethnic differences as symptoms of structural, rather than individual, disparities (Hylton 2012; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008).

Multiple authors have described how structural disparities likely contribute to high rates of homelessness among people of color. According to Baker (1996), Carter (2011), Hopper and Milburn (1996), Johnson (2010), and Shinn and Khadduri (2020), historical and ongoing discrimination in housing and land use are the backdrop against which current racial disparities in homelessness can be understood. Discriminatory policies such as redlining entrenched racial segregation in American cities and excluded specific racial and ethnic groups from the possibility of home ownership and generational wealth accumulation (Rothstein 2017). Such practices constrained housing choices and widened the racial wealth gap, preventing many households of color from building a financial buffer to withstand economic hardship (Pfeffer and Killewald 2018). For Native Americans specifically, research has described how mass removal and forced relocation created disadvantage that is now compounded by limited, substandard, and overcrowded affordable housing on tribal lands (Whitbeck, Crawford, and Sittner Hartshorn 2012; Olivet, Dones, and Richard 2018).

Ongoing discrimination in employment, health care, and criminal justice also shape why Black/African Americans, Native Americans, and other historically marginalized groups are more likely to experience homelessness. Research finds persistent discrimination in employment and credit markets (Pager and Shepherd 2008). Health disparities continue to lead to decreased life chances for people of color, and physical and mental health conditions can contribute to homelessness by interfering with income and social ties (Ford and Airhihenbuwa 2010; Lee, Tyler, and Wright 2010). People of color are incarcerated at significantly higher rates than their white counterparts (Alexander 2010), and formerly incarcerated people are up to ten times more likely to become homeless (Couloute 2018; see Remster, this volume). The incarceration of Black men also contributes to homelessness among Black children by destabilizing finances, hurting eligibility for welfare and public housing, and impacting maternal mental health (Wildeman 2014). Finally, at least two studies have questioned whether the concentration of shelters in predominately Black neighborhoods in some cities could contribute to increased shelter

utilization by African Americans and decreased use among other groups (Carter 2011; Metraux et al. 2016), but evidence testing this hypothesis is limited.

Despite these explanations, research on how structural racism drives homelessness is in its infancy. Moreover, literature on how the homelessness response system may perpetuate racial inequities is limited and community-specific (Jones 2016). Our study builds on this emerging work through quantitative and qualitative research in eight communities. We show not only racial disproportionality in the homelessness response system across communities, but also less favorable outcomes for people of color. Our interviews with people of color highlight how racism and discrimination influence people's trajectories. CRT also influences our conclusions. Aviles de Bradley (2015) and Jones (2016) suggest that the structural inequities that lead to racial disparities in homelessness may be compounded by a "colorblind" approach to addressing it. Adopting CRT's principles of race-explicit policy and "theory-informed action" (Ford and Airhihenbuwa 2010), we end by translating our findings into equity-based policy and practice recommendations.

Methods

Eight U.S. communities participated in the SPARC study between 2016 to 2019. Sites were defined as Continuum of Care (CoC) jurisdictions (i.e., the geographic areas through which HUD funds homeless services). In this article, we identify each community with a letter (A–H). The sample included three West Coast communities (A, C, H); two large counties in the Upper Midwest (B, G); two large southern cities (D, E); and a regional CoC in the Northeast (F). One community had a population of fewer than 500,000 (F), four were between 500,000 and 1 million (A, C, E, H), and three more than 1 million (B, D, G). The sample included two communities with populations that were majority people of color (C, E) (see Table A1 of the online appendix for characteristics by site). We selected communities based on willingness to participate and capacity to share data and provide sites for recruiting interview participants. The Heartland Institutional Review Board approved all study instruments and activities.

Aim 1: Disproportionality metrics for each community

By comparing the racial composition of people in the homelessness response system to those in the general population in eight communities, we examined whether patterns of disproportionality are similar across geographically and racially diverse communities. Each community provided three years of data (2013–2015) from their Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS), an electronic database used to collect standardized data on clients of homeless service programs. HMIS data on client characteristics and use of services are entered by service providers at the time of service. Although HMIS data can include sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness, those less likely to

access formal services may be less likely to be counted in the system. In particular, immigrants may avoid formal services due to lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate programs and policies that exclude or discourage undocumented immigrants from using services (Baker 1996; Culhane et al. 2019).

The research team aggregated and deduplicated data by eliminating exact record matches. In each case, we included in the analysis HMIS data elements associated with the most recent entry date into the HMIS system. We then compared racial/ethnic composition of the HMIS sample to 2015 five-year American Community Survey (ACS) data on the general population and those living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau 2015). We calculated disproportionality metrics by race/ethnicity for each community as a proportion of those experiencing homelessness to that group's proportion of the general population of that community. This metric is computed using the following: ([% group in care/total in care]/[% group in population/total in population]).

Aim 2: Qualitative perspectives from people of color experiencing homelessness

CRT centers the voices of people of color (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Hylton 2012). To do this in our study, we conducted 195 interviews with people of color with recent or current experiences of homelessness. Eligible participants self-identified as a person of color (nonwhite), were at least 16 years of age, had personal experience of homelessness, and could use English in conversation. In two communities, we also conducted interviews in Spanish. We recruited participants using convenience and purposive sampling methods through community liaisons. Interviewers reviewed consent documents with eligible participants in a private space, emphasizing the voluntary nature of the study. All participants gave written informed consent immediately prior to interviews and received a $25 incentive for participating. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted by a multiracial team trained in trauma-informed interviewing. A semistructured interview protocol included questions on experiences of homelessness and use of services, social support and family, education and methods of earning money, and perceptions about racism and homelessness.

The team used a combined phenomenological and grounded theory approach to develop a codebook and identify themes in the data (Starks and Trinidad 2007). Through comparison and discussion, a multiracial team of four coders (three of whom were also interviewers) generated a codebook and established intercoder agreement on twenty-four transcripts from the first site. Each additional transcript was independently coded by two team members using NVivo 12. For each site's dataset, predominant codes were grouped together into community-level themes. Finally, we identified themes that were most consistent across communities. We continued to draw on CRT during the data analysis process. For example, by acknowledging that racism is built into all social structures and interactions, themes that may have been interpreted as "race-neutral" without a CRT lens, such as lack of affordable housing, were analyzed and contextualized through an understanding of the connections between race and housing in the United States.

Aim 3: Race/ethnicity as a predictor of housing outcomes

While the qualitative interviews focused on the experiences of people of color, we also conducted a comparative examination of outcomes using quantitative data including white individuals. Using the same HMIS dataset constructed for aim 1, we conducted multilevel logistic regression to examine predictors associated with exiting the HMIS system, including exiting into homelessness (e.g., returning to a homeless situation after leaving a shelter or other program), exiting into a doubled-up situation (e.g., staying temporarily with family or friends), and exiting into permanent housing *with* or *without* a subsidy. These primary exit destinations are likely to have different consequences for participants, including long-term housing stability or returns to homelessness. We examined whether race was a predictor of these outcomes, using white as a reference group to explore whether people of color are more or less likely than white people to experience each outcome. Following a CRT framework, we examined race as a predictor in that it suggests the consequences of past and present racism, as opposed to any inherent individual or group vulnerability (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008).

Because homelessness trajectories and eligibility for services often differ by household type (Lee, Tyler, and Wright 2010; Shinn and Khadduri 2020), we analyzed data separately for young adults (ages 18–24), single adults, and families. We used Mplus version 8.3 (Muthén 2017) to conduct multilevel analyses. To account for the nested structure of the data, we performed multilevel analyses with community as a clustering variable. Thus, we computed standard errors taking into account nonindependence of observations due to site clustering. To determine the amount of unique variance explained by each predictor, we conducted multivariate analysis where all variables were entered simultaneously into the model. Exit destination was missing in 32 percent of cases. To deal with this, we used the Mplus MISSING feature to employ full information maximum likelihood (FIML), resulting in means and variances that are less biased than those using alternative approaches, such as listwise deletion or mean substitution (Muthén 2017).

Results

HMIS sample characteristics

The aggregate HMIS dataset for all eight study communities consisted of 161,901 individuals. Table 1 shows sample characteristics, which included a greater proportion of Black/African American individuals and smaller proportions of Hispanic and white individuals than the national estimates of sheltered persons for 2015 (43 percent, 49 percent, and 17 percent, respectively; HUD 2015). Racial composition varied by household type: Black/African Americans accounted for 75.9 percent of young adults 18 to 24 years old ($n = 11,785$), 63.2

TABLE 1
Sample Characteristics (*N* = 161,901)

Race	
Black or African American	57.5%
White	35.0%
American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN)	2.4%
Asian	1.0%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (NHOPI)	1.1%
Two or more races	2.8%
Ethnicity	
Non-Hispanic/Non-Latinx	91.9%
Hispanic/Latinx	8.1%
Gender	
Female	45.2%
Male	54.6%
Age	
Years (mean, standard deviation)	31.25 (18.99)
Veterans Status	
Yes	9.3%
No	90.7%
Presence of disability	
Yes	37.3%
No	62.7%

percent of single adults 25 years and older (*n* = 40,973), and 55.9 percent of families (including children) (*n* = 41,267).

Aim 1: Disproportionality metrics

Using HMIS and ACS data, we calculated disproportionality metrics. Figure 1 shows the disproportionality metric for people experiencing homelessness for each of the eight communities by race and ethnicity. Across all sites, Black/African Americans were overrepresented in the homeless population compared to the general population, ranging from 1.67 times greater to more than 7 times greater than their proportion in the general population. The proportion of AI/AN individuals ranged from approximately 2 times greater to more than 17 times greater than their proportion in the general population. Conversely, white, Asian, and Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islanders (NHOPI) individuals were underrepresented, ranging from approximately proportional to more than 3.5 times less. Similarly, Asian and NHOPI populations (combined to align with ACS groupings) ranged from 1.25 times less to more than 11 times less than their proportion in the general population. Disproportionality metrics of Hispanic/Latinx homelessness varied, with some sites showing an overrepresentation and others showing a slight

FIGURE 1
Disproportionality Metrics by Race and Ethnicity

■ White ■ Black/AA ■ AI/AN ■ Asian and NHOPI ■ Hispanic
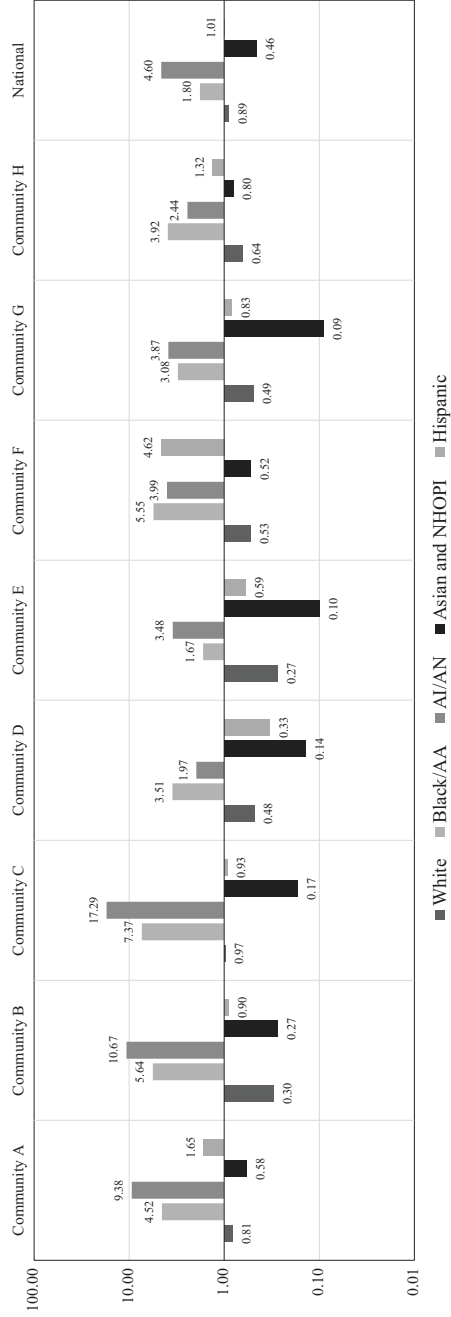
underrepresentation. With the exception of this variation in Hispanic/Latinx homelessness, the same racial/ethnic groups were overrepresented (Black/African American and AI/AN) and underrepresented (white, Asian, and NHOPI) regardless of geography or size of community. In each community, Black/African Americans and AI/AN people also experienced homelessness at significantly higher rates than their proportion of people living in poverty, confirming that poverty alone does not explain racial disparities in homelessness. This was not the case among Hispanics; in one community, Hispanics were 32 percent of the population, 49 percent of those in poverty, and only 10.5 percent of those in the homeless service system (complete racial/ethnic characteristics for each community, including general population, poverty, and homelessness data, are available in Table A1 of the online appendix).

Aim 2: Qualitative perspectives from people of color experiencing homelessness

Among the 195 interview participants, 64 percent identified as Black/African American, 13 percent as multiple races, 11 percent as Hispanic/Latinx, 4 percent as AI/AN, 2 percent as NHOPI, 1 percent as Asian, and 5 percent as other or unknown. A third were 51 years and older, 37 percent were between the ages of 31 and 50, and 29 percent were ages 18 to 30 years. Just more than half (51 percent) were women, and 76 percent identified as straight. Among the qualitative themes identified across communities, six were particularly prominent: (1) access to housing, (2) economic mobility, (3) criminal justice, (4) behavioral health, (5) family stabilization, and (6) experiences of racism and discrimination in the service system.

The interviews indicated that *lack of access to safe, decent, and truly affordable housing* was a major factor contributing to homelessness. Housing and neighborhood settings that people could afford were often in areas far from jobs and lacking in needed infrastructure, such as transportation and grocery stores. Participants discussed pests and other maintenance issues and rent that was perceived to be much higher than what the housing was worth. As a middle-aged Black woman explained, if "good" housing was available, it was scarce:

Interviewer: What kept causing you to become homeless?
Respondent: Either the apartments I moved in weren't well maintained, too high in rent. . . . Just like I said, it happens and it's just awful. There was no way of like the good housing, you had to, at that time, you had to meet a certain standard, or criteria, whatever you call it. At that time, I guess I didn't meet it. I don't know. Or, as they are now, there were too long of a wait. The waiting list was extremely long.

Several participants explained how racism and discrimination intersected with access to housing when applications were not accepted "for some reason." A Black man in his 20s described:

> When you go fill out an application for an apartment and you put that you're a Black male on there, you know, they're going to go deeper into your credit, deeper into your history, background check, all that just because you put on there that you're Black male. . . . And when you go into the apartment and give them the application directly and they see your face and see who you are, you know, they racial profile you from right then.

Respondents understood they were discriminated against in myriad ways, from a felt sense, to white friends getting approved for applications they were denied, to sources of income being an issue to some landlords but not others. Additionally, people discussed how evictions exacerbated poverty and were a barrier to future housing. Unfortunately, housing placements offered through service programs were often too expensive to maintain without ongoing subsidies. Yet as described by a young Black woman, people were sometimes encouraged to take those placements regardless.

Interviewer: Were you surprised that your caseworker encouraged you to take an apartment that you felt like you couldn't afford?

Respondent: Kind of, a little bit . . . because at that time I was in between jobs like it was like temp jobs so not knowing how long the assignment was going to last so yeah I kind of was surprised at that . . . I didn't feel like I had a lot of help in looking for it or lot of time. I felt like I was like stuck in a certain time limit to find a house before some type of deadline happened.

When discussing the ability to afford housing, participants described *barriers to employment and economic mobility*. People often had extensive job histories, but few jobs paid a living wage, provided benefits, offered opportunities for advancement, or provided full-time hours. Some respondents reported experiencing racial discrimination most acutely when searching for jobs. One Black woman, who was 60 years old and had a long work history, put it this way:

> 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.

In addition to their own financial challenges, respondents identified the economic hardships of friends and family as factors that increased their risk of homelessness. It was not just that those we interviewed were poor, but also that friends and families in their social networks were often dealing with their own economic constraints and housing instability.

Respondent: Me and my two kids and their father was living inside his mother's house, which she owns the house but she just gave it up, so it was a vacant house.

Interviewer: Okay, so she owned it but she just wasn't there?

Respondent: Yeah, like she owned it, and then she wasn't like able to take care of it how she used to, and, like, things started getting cut off slowly like the water, the gas, electricity, and started having no food, and then like she left and then we didn't have nowhere to go so we just stayed. And then after that it started to get cold outside, so we are just like let's just go to the shelter.

This example from a young Black woman shows how in some households, economic instability can compound when family members double up with one another. In such a situation, family members can pool their resources but may also feel additional financial strain.

Participants saw *criminal justice involvement* as a barrier to housing and employment, particularly for those with a felony conviction on their record. In the words of a Black woman, "I wasn't able to use [my housing] voucher because every place that I went to turned me down because of the one felony that I have, which I went to prison for, on my record." Participants attributed difficulty securing employment to criminal records rather than lack of skills or opportunities. As one Black man who had been incarcerated for 10 years highlighted:

> Then you come out, you're not trusted now. You can't even be no fireman, you can't work in no factory. Wait a minute, I did all this work for 13 cents an hour in the pen . . . mattress factories, furniture factories. . . . You do laundry . . . license plates. . . . All this stuff that they call you qualified and train you to do, and you get out here they won't hire us.

These findings suggest that criminal justice histories, combined with discrimination from landlords and employers, create barriers for people of color as they attempt to avoid homelessness.

Some individuals described challenges with *mental health and substance use* as factors contributing to their pathways into homelessness, conditions exacerbated by the stress of experiencing homelessness, or both. Some narratives, like this one from a Black woman, suggested that behavioral health and homeless services are not coordinated: "[I was at] a program for mental health . . . they're supposed to help you find housing, like going to a co-op. . . . But then at the last day, they didn't do the co-op because they said that my bipolar symptoms were too high. So then they discharged me to the street." In addition to these narratives, some experienced biases about behavioral health. One Native American participant who identified their gender as "2-Spirit" described a school counselor who "told me that because I was Native American, I was going to become an alcoholic."

Respondents reported *challenges with maintaining stability within family units* and described how this contributed to housing insecurity, particularly due to involvement with child welfare, juvenile justice, and the criminal justice system. A young woman who identified as Puerto Rican, Greek, and white explained how the system impacted her and her daughter:

> I've been in trouble a lot of times for running away from foster care and foster homes to go back home. I mean I didn't understand why I couldn't go back home, so I just ran from the system . . . and then eventually, they just kind of, after I hit 13, I was making my own decisions, so they let me go. But, um, as a mother, they took my kid two days after she was born because I was homeless.

Multisystem involvement and intergenerational poverty strained families' abilities to stay together and successfully avoid or exit homelessness. While respondents often described giving and receiving financial and in-kind support to family,

they also shared the ways in which system involvement created barriers, as described in the following statement from a young Black man:

> I just notice like my support system—my family was not as tight and that played a big role, you know, the family that don't reach out and stuff because they're dealing with the way the system has affected them long-term. And . . . it's not their fault.

Finally, interviewers asked participants whether and how racism impacted their experience of homelessness. In response, participants reported discrimination across education, employment, housing, health care, and criminal justice. Participants also described *racism within the homeless service system*. One young adult, who identified as Colombian, Mexican, and genderqueer, described how providers' unconscious biases impact service experiences: "People of color are treated differently, even when folks try not to. I think people are so conditioned . . . their thought process that they do unconsciously, yeah. And the thing is, it's not overt. It's the . . . infantilization of people of color . . . it's about those low expectations." Participants also critiqued the lack of diversity among program staff, especially at the leadership level. Reflecting on how to improve homeless services, the same respondent went on to state:

> Hire more people of color, straight up . . . there are amazing folks of color. The only difference is that we might not have a bachelor's degree, a PhD, and all these accreditations. . . . It doesn't mean we're not qualified. . . . If we're not seeing ourselves reflected, it's like how are we going to see that we can get out of it?

For many, "seeing ourselves reflected" was also about feeling safe. A Latino man, whose words are translated below, commented on feeling unsafe at programs without Latinx staff:

> While I'm going to a center in which I know Latinos are going to give me service, I feel safer because they know that – they know my language, they know where I come from, and they know they can't discriminate against me because they have gone through the same thing I have. Meanwhile, if I go to another center, I feel unsafe.

Finally, respondents described seeing the effects of disparate treatment through observing white clients who faced fewer requirements, were kicked out of programs less often, and were offered housing more often. While it is impossible for our qualitative research to corroborate these narratives, decades of research in CRT maintains that first person accounts from people of color are valid and essential sources of knowledge in understanding racism (Hylton 2012), and we aim to listen to and consider the implications of these accounts. In the next section, we use the eight communities' HMIS data to examine how race and ethnicity predict housing outcomes.

Aim 3: Predictors of exit destination

Results of multivariate, multilevel logistic regression analyses of predictors of exit destination across three household types (unaccompanied young adults

age 18–24 years, families, and single adults), using white as the reference group, found that race was a predictor of exit outcome in the majority of analyses (Table 2). However, the strength of race as a predictor varied across household type and exit destination. Black/African American young adults age 18 to 24 were 69 percent more likely to exit back into homelessness and 27 percent less likely to exit into a doubled-up situation than their white counterparts. AI/AN and Asian young adults were 56 percent and 70 percent less likely, respectively, to exit into permanent housing situations than their white counterparts. Gender played a role in determining exit outcomes in some cases. Young adult women were three times less likely to exit into homelessness than men.

Family data showed less disproportionality in exit outcomes. Race was not a significant predictor of exiting into homelessness (also see Solari, Walton, and Khadduri, this volume). However, families identifying as two or more races were 50 percent more likely to exit into permanent housing than white families, and NHOPI families were 44 percent less likely to exit into a doubled-up situation than white families.

For single adults, race was not a predictor of exiting into homelessness, but women were four times less likely to exit into homelessness than their male counterparts. AI/AN single adults were 40 percent less likely to exit into a permanent housing situation than whites. Two race categories and ethnicity predicted exiting into a doubled-up situation for this group: Asians were 57 percent less likely and individuals identifying as two or more races were 80 percent less likely to have this outcome. Finally, Hispanic/Latinx single adults were 27 percent less likely than their non-Hispanic counterparts to exit into a doubled-up situation.

Discussion

National data indicate a dramatic overrepresentation of people of color, especially Black/African American and AI/AN people, among those experiencing homelessness (HUD 2018b; Moses 2019; Morton, Chávez, and Moore 2019). The SPARC study aimed to understand how societal conditions lead to greater homelessness risk for people of color and how homelessness response systems may perpetuate inequities. First, by examining patterns of disproportionality across communities of varying size, location, and racial composition, we documented the consistency with which Black/African American and AI/AN populations are overrepresented in homelessness systems; how white and Asian groups are underrepresented; and the complexity of the Hispanic/Latinx experience.

In all but one community, rates of Hispanic/Latinx homelessness were lower than Hispanic/Latinx poverty rates. However, previous studies have examined whether official estimates of homelessness among this group represent an undercount due to low service utilization and the fact that Hispanic/Latinx people are more likely to reside in nontraditional settings (Baker 1996; Conroy and Heer 2003). Recent studies support this theory by documenting differential rates of service use by Latinx people due to concerns about family separation, lack of culturally and linguistically responsive programs, and misconceptions about

TABLE 2
Race and Other Demographics as Predictors of Exit Outcomes across Household Types

	Youth			Single Adults			Families		
	Homelessness	Doubled Up	Permanent Housing	Homelessness	Doubled Up	Permanent Housing	Homelessness	Doubled Up	Permanent Housing
Race/ethnicity									
Black/African American	1.685*	0.785*	1.111	1.197	1.097	0.913	0.767	0.959	1.129
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1.697	0.752	0.642*	1.470	1.081	0.712*	1.433	1.007	0.828
Asian	1.095	1.409*	0.588**	1.064	0.638**	0.975	1.691	0.614	1.220
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.483	1.593	0.773	0.746	0.827	1.307	1.574	0.695*	0.912
More than one race	1.938	0.697	0.766	2.295	0.557**	0.774	3.300	0.743	0.665*
Hispanic	1.188	1.031	0.904	0.908	0.786*	1.188	1.443	0.830	1.078
Other demographic characteristics									
Age	1.117**	1.002	0.962	1.008	0.979**	1.006	1.015**	0.984**	1.006
Gender[a]	0.329**	0.980	1.688	0.248**	0.919	3.162**	1.113**	0.969	0.983
Disability	1.397*	1.005	0.627**	0.857	0.994	0.888	0.997	0.915*	1.021
Veteran	0.700*	0.420**	2.554**	0.355**	0.632**	2.886**	0.703	1.015	0.932

NOTE: White is the reference group for all race categories.
a. Female is reference group.
*p < .05. **p < .001.

shelter eligibility among noncitizens (Culhane et al. 2019; Chinchilla and Gabrielian 2019). Both papers recommended increased outreach, nontraditional locations for assessment and intake (e.g., health centers, churches), and linguistically inclusive programs.

While people of color were overrepresented among all groups, the dramatic disproportionality of homelessness that we found among youth/young adults of color is of particular concern. Our findings are consistent with previous research showing Black youth to have high rates of homelessness compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Morton et al. 2018). Such elevated risk may be tied to overrepresentation of young people of color in foster care and juvenile justice (Shah et al. 2017; Aratani 2009).

In each of the eight communities, qualitative interviews indicated that lack of jobs with adequate wages and benefits and lack of access to safe, decent, and affordable housing were common experiences for people of color experiencing homelessness. Additionally, multisystem involvement—particularly with child welfare, criminal justice, and behavioral health systems—were common, with participants often reporting inadequate collaboration between homeless programs and these systems. Involvement with these systems posed barriers to exiting homelessness, especially when felony and eviction histories obstructed access to jobs and housing. Across these areas, participants noted the impact of interpersonal and institutional racism and discrimination, including within the homelessness response system.

We then explored how race and ethnicity are associated with exit destinations from the homeless service system using HMIS data. The study found race to be a varying and complex predictor of exit outcomes, where household group, age, and gender continue to be critical factors. Race and ethnicity were associated with exits from the system, with clearer implications for youth and single adults than for families. One notable finding was that Black/African American young adults were at a significantly higher risk of exit back into homelessness. Research should further explore this finding to understand structural risk factors and develop strategies to ensure that these early homelessness episodes do not become a lifetime of moving in and out of homelessness.

Our findings suggest that disproportionate rates of homelessness among people of color can be understood as a symptom of the failure of multiple systems to provide equal opportunity for all racial and ethnic groups. For those who become homeless, lack of adequate resources to address needs (e.g., income, health, or housing) is also the result of racism across systems. Despite inconsistent findings from our regression models, it is clear that equity-based responses to homelessness should strive to address how society continues to disadvantage people of color.

Limitations

This study is limited in its data sources. While we attempted to partner with communities from a wide geographical range, results may not be nationally representative. Additionally, while HMIS data are standardized nationally, data

accuracy is dependent on the nature and extent of participation across service programs, and HMIS does not include people who avoid contact with services. Furthermore, while datasets included both sheltered and unsheltered individuals, this varied by community, and because some communities did not specify project type, we could not analyze these groups separately. The extent of missing data in exit destinations is a potential concern. However, imputation using full information maximum likelihood (FIML) and the large sample size ($N = 161{,}901$) add confidence to our findings.

Some scholars have argued that the use of white as a reference group in regression analysis may reinforce the idea that the white experience is "normal" and the experience of people of color is "other" (Mayhew and Simonoff 2015). We chose this approach because it allowed us to explore inequities experienced by all nonwhite racial groups and to identify those outcomes most disproportionately experienced by different racial/ethnic groups. Additionally, although disproportionality metrics are useful, they are limited; there is a theoretical maximum for each group based on that group's size relative to the total population (Shaw et al. 2008). We chose to calculate these metrics because they are easy to understand, and we hoped to encourage other communities to compare their data to our findings. Finally, race and ethnicity were analyzed separately, rendering the white racial group inclusive of those who identified as Hispanic.

There are also limitations to our qualitative methods. We allowed new codes to be added to the codebook with the analysis of each subsequent community's dataset, but we did not go back to apply new codes to earlier communities. However, these were second-level codes with more specificity, and most fit into the major themes presented. In addition, we were not able to present community-level contextual differences because geographic differences were confounded with racial composition (e.g., we interviewed more Hispanic people on the West Coast). Finally, we did not include a comparison group of white participants in the qualitative interviews. While this may be viewed as a limitation in some theoretical orientations, CRT encourages looking primarily toward those who are oppressed to understand their marginalization (Hylton 2012).

Implications

This study has implications for research, policy, and practice in homelessness and other sectors. Research and policy to address homelessness in the United States have not focused on the disproportionately high rates of homelessness among specific racial and ethnic groups or on racial inequities in housing outcomes (Jones 2016). We argue that we must explicitly address racism and racial inequity to reduce high rates of homelessness. Based on our engagement with stakeholders across the country, we believe that the development of new interventions, research, and policies at local, state, and federal levels will be most successful when guided by the expertise of people of color who have experiences of homelessness.

Future homelessness research should explore risk and protective factors for specific subgroups, including attention to multiple marginalized identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, country of origin, citizenship status, age, and religion). Intersectional research will result in deeper understanding of unique experiences, strengths, and needs. Research should examine points in the homelessness response system at which racial inequities may occur (e.g., prioritization of limited housing resources for specific subgroups such as "chronically homeless individuals"), and to develop innovative solutions for transforming systems through a racial equity lens. For example, we did not find Black-white differences in exits from homelessness for families. Solari et al. (this volume) found that Black and white families with access to housing choice vouchers did not have significantly different lease up rates. Our qualitative interviews, however, suggest that we should consider the additional stress a family of color may undergo to find an apartment. Do the neighborhoods they end up in offer equitable access to public transportation, jobs, food, and education? If not, do these inequities lead to a greater likelihood of future homelessness? Solari's finding that Black families were more often in unstable housing after three years warrants future research on these questions.

We can understand the overrepresentation of people of color among those experiencing homelessness as a result of the nation's lack of investment in communities of color and lack of reparations for past harms and social exclusion (Olivet, Dones, and Richard 2018; Shinn 2010). Such a situation underscores the need for upstream prevention and calls for expanding the social safety net, increasing investment in strategies to make housing more affordable, and enacting policies to address stagnant wages. National and local governments should increase the affordable housing stock and enact policies to counter rising costs. Focusing on racial equity to prevent homelessness for those most at risk necessitates stronger enforcement of the Fair Housing Act and employment nondiscrimination laws.

Additionally, other social systems have a critical role to play in addressing racial inequities in homelessness. This might include early identification of homelessness risk through partnerships with health care and education systems, including developing predictive analytics to identify those at greatest risk. High rates of homelessness among youth of color justify specific initiatives to prevent homelessness for young people of color exiting foster care. Our qualitative interviews demonstrate the need for homeless services to work with the criminal justice system to prevent homelessness at the point of reentry and to provide targeted eviction prevention in neighborhoods where people of color struggle with housing insecurity.

Finally, homeless programs themselves must become more racially equitable. Race/ethnicity predicted some exits from HMIS, and our qualitative interviews demonstrated the ways in which racism permeates even the most well-intentioned services. Agencies should diversify staff, leadership, and boards of directors to include significant representation by people of color and people with lived experience of homelessness. Staff should be trained on antiracism and racial equity–based program design. Leaders should use data-driven decision-making

to promote equity. Governments should prioritize funding for culturally specific and linguistically inclusive programs. Racial equity competencies should be developed and disseminated across programs. Only by explicitly centering racial equity across research, practice, and policy will it be possible to reduce high rates of homelessness among people of color and, ultimately, end homelessness for everyone.

References

Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Aratani, Yumiko. 2009. *Homeless children and youth: Causes and consequences*. Washington, DC: National Center for Children in Poverty. Available from http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_888.pdf.

Aviles de Bradley, Ann. 2015. Homeless educational policy: Exploring a racialized discourse through a critical race theory lens. *Urban Education* 50 (7): 839–69.

Baker, Susan González. 1996. Homelessness and the Latino paradox. In *Homelessness in America*, ed. Jim Baumohl, 132–40. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.

Carter, George R., III. 2011. From exclusion to destitution: Race, affordable housing, and homelessness. *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research* 13 (1): 33–70.

Chinchilla, Melissa, and Sonya Gabrielian. 2019. Stemming the rise of Latinx homelessness: Lessons from Los Angeles County. *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless*. doi:10.1080/10530789.2019.1660049.

Conroy, Stephen J., and David Heer. 2003. Hidden Hispanic homelessness in Los Angeles: The "Latino paradox" revisited. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 25 (4): 530–38.

Couloute, Lucius. 2018. *Nowhere to go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people*. Northampton MA: Prison Policy Initiative. Available from https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html.

Culhane, Dennis, Stephen Metraux, Dan Treglia, Kim Lowman, and Angel Ortiz-Siberon. 2019. *Latinx homelessness in Philadelphia: Rates of services use, perceived barriers and assets, and potential opportunities for leveraging city reform efforts to address service gaps*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania. Available from https://works.bepress.com/dennis_culhane/233/.

Delgado, R., and Jean Stefancic. 2001. *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Ford, Chandra, and Collins Airhihenbuwa. 2010. Critical race theory, race equity, and public health: Toward antiracism praxis. *American Journal of Public Health* 100 (S1): S30–S35.

Fusaro, Vincent A., Helen G. Levy, and Luke Shaefer. 2018. Racial and ethnic disparities in the lifetime prevalence of homelessness in the United States. *Demography* 55 (6): 2119–28.

Hopper, Kim, and Norweeta G. Milburn. 1996. Homelessness among African Americans: A historical and contemporary perspective. In *Homelessness in America*, ed. Jim Baumohl, 123–31. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.

Hylton, K. 2012. Talk the talk, walk the walk: Defining critical race theory in research. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 15 (1): 23–41.

Johnson, Roberta Ann. 2010. African American and homeless: Moving through history. *Journal of Black Studies* 40 (4): 583–605.

Jones, Marian Moser. 2016. Does race matter in addressing homelessness? A review of the literature. *World Medical & Health Policy* 8 (2): 139–56.

Lee, Barrett A., Kimberly A. Tyler, and James D. Wright. 2010. The new homelessness revisited. *Annual Review of Sociology* 36:501–21.

Mayhew, Matthew J., and Jeffrey S. Simonoff. 2015. Nonwhite, no more: Effect coding as an alternative to dummy coding with implications for higher education researchers. *Journal of College Student Development* 56 (2): 170–75.

Metraux, Stephen, Janna Manjelievskaia, Dan Treglia, Roy Hoffman, Dennis Culhane, and Bon Ku. 2016. Posthumously assessing a homeless population: Services use and characteristics. *Psychiatric Services* 67 (12): 1334–39.

Morton, Matthew H., Raúl Chávez, and Kelly Moore. 2019. Prevalence and correlates of homelessness Among American Indian and Alaska Native youth. *Journal of Primary Prevention* 40 (6): 643–60.

Morton, Matthew H., Amy Dworsky, Jennifer L. Matjasko, Susanna R. Curry, David Schlueter, Raúl Chávez, and Anne F. Farrell. 2018. Prevalence and correlates of youth homelessness in the United States. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 62 (1): 14–21.

Moses, Joy. 2019. *Demographic data project: Race, ethnicity, and homelessness*. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness. Available from https://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/3rd-Demo-Brief-Race.pdf.

Muthén, Bengt O. 2017. *Mplus user's guide 8th edition*. Los Angeles, CA: Muthén & Muthén.

Olivet, Jeffrey, Marc Dones, and Molly Richard. 2018. The intersection of homelessness, racism, and mental illness. In *Racism and psychiatry*, eds. Morgan Medlock, Derri Shatsel, Nhi-Ha Trinh, and David Williams, 55–69. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature.

Pager, Devah, and Hana Shepherd. 2008. The sociology of discrimination: Racial discrimination in employment, housing, credit, and consumer markets. *Annual Review of Sociology* 34:181–209.

Pfeffer, Fabian T., and Alexandra Killewald. 2018. Generations of advantage. Multigenerational correlations in family wealth. *Social Forces* 96 (4): 1411–42.

Remster, Brianna. 2021. Homelessness among formerly incarcerated men: Patterns and predictors. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (this volume).

Rothstein, Richard. 2017. *The color of law: A forgotten history of how our government segregated America*. New York, NY: Liveright Publishing.

Shah, Melissa Ford, Qinghua Liu, Mark Eddy, Susan Barkan, David Marshall, David Mancuso, Barbara Lucenko, and Alice Huber. 2017. Predicting homelessness among emerging adults aging out of foster care. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 60:33–43.

Shaw, Terry V., Emily Putnam-Hornstein, Joseph Magruder, and Barbara Needell. 2008. Measuring racial disparity in child welfare. *Child Welfare* 87 (2): 23–36.

Shinn, Marybeth. 2010. Homelessness, poverty, and social exclusion in the United States and Europe. *European Journal on Homelessness* 4:19–44.

Shinn, Marybeth, and Jill Khadduri. 2020. *In the midst of plenty: Homelessness and what to do about it*. New York, NY: Wiley Blackwell.

Solari, Claudia D., Douglas Walton, and Jill Khadduri. 2021. How well do housing vouchers work for Black families experiencing homelessness? Evidence from the Family Options Study. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (this volume).

Starks, Helene, and Susan Brown Trinidad. 2007. Choose your method: A comparison of phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory. *Qualitative Health Research* 17 (10): 1372–80.

U.S. Census Bureau. 2015. 2011–2015 (5-year) American Community Survey, Table S1703. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2015. *The 2015 annual homeless assessment report (AHAR) to Congress part 2*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2018a. *The 2018 annual homeless assessment report (AHAR) to Congress part 1*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2018b. *The 2018 annual homeless assessment report (AHAR) to Congress part 2*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Whitbeck, Les B., Devan M. Crawford, and Kelley J. Sittner Hartshorn. 2012. Correlates of homeless episodes among Indigenous people. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 49 (1–2): 156–67.

Wildeman, Christopher. 2014. Parental incarceration, child homelessness, and the invisible consequences of mass imprisonment. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 651 (1): 74–96.

Zuberi, Tukufu, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. 2008. *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.