NATIONAL COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS



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Homelessness and Racial Equity in the United States

Assessing Progress Since 2018

2026

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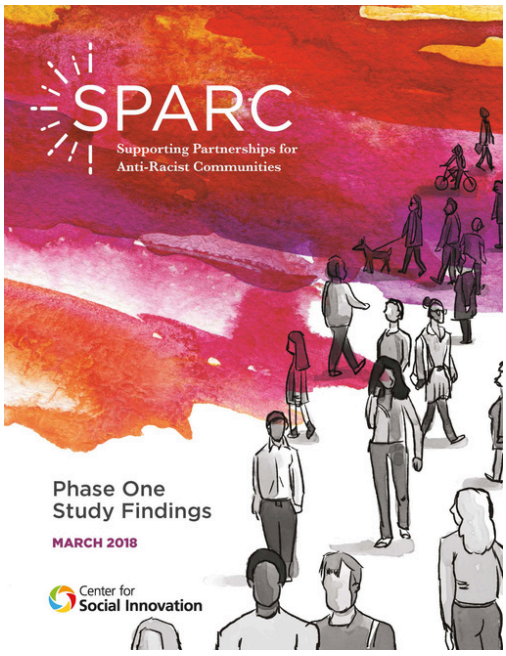
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INTRODUCTION

Across U.S. communities, we see stark racial disparities in who experiences homelessness. People of color, particularly Black and Native American people, face homelessness at elevated rates. In the last decade, there has been greater acknowledgment of those disparities through national-level research, local evaluation and planning, and critical conversations involving many dedicated groups working to prevent and end homelessness.



For example, starting in 2016, several communities came together to examine their local homelessness disparities and determine strategies for addressing them through the SPARC (Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities) initiative led by C4 Innovations.[1] Around the same time, advocates, providers, and policymakers in Los Angeles launched an Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness to examine local data, host listening sessions, and make policy and practice recommendations towards addressing the overrepresentation of Black people among those experiencing homelessness in LA.[2] Final reports from both initiatives pointed to structural racism across systems as factors driving racial inequities in homelessness.

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[1] Olivet, J., Wilkey, C., Richard, M., Dones, M., Tripp, J., Beit-Arie, M., ... & Cannon, R. (2021). Racial inequity and homelessness: findings from the SPARC study. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 693(1), 82-100.

[2] Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. (2018). *Report and recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee on Black people experiencing homelessness.* Available from: https://ahcd.assembly.ca.gov/sites/ahcd.assembly.ca.gov/files/report-and-recommendations-of-the-ad-hoc-committee-on-black-people-experiencing-homelessness.pdf

In 2018, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) further elevated racial equity as a federal priority by incorporating equity-related criteria into its evaluation of Continuum of Care (CoC) funding applications, including whether CoCs examine racial disparities in their data and identify steps to address them. This policy shift—combined with heightened national attention to racial injustice following the murder of George Floyd in 2020–2021 and widespread movements to confront systemic racism—prompted many communities to incorporate racial equity into their homelessness response strategies, either for the first time or in more explicit and intentional ways.

This report summarizes a research project conducted by the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) to examine the steps communities—including cities, counties, and other Continuum of Care structures—have taken since 2018 to address racial disparities in homelessness. The project was designed as a descriptive scan of publicly articulated actions, rather than an evaluation of effectiveness. Our goal was to document concrete steps that homelessness response systems, or the jurisdictions in which they operate, have publicly identified, initiated, or implemented to reduce racial disparities in homelessness or to apply racial equity frameworks within their systems. Put simply, we ask: what actions have communities taken in response to increased recognition of racial inequities in homelessness?

Through this work, we seek to contribute timely insights that can inform policy, practice, and advocacy, particularly as communities navigate evolving expectations around equity and accountability. This project is dedicated not only to acknowledging the challenges inherent in addressing racial inequities, but also to supporting constructive, forward-looking dialogue about how homelessness systems can move toward more equitable outcomes.

Importantly, this report is released amid significant uncertainty for the homelessness field. Recent and proposed federal policy changes—including actions and rhetoric associated with the Trump Administration that threaten diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives—have created new risks for communities engaged in explicit racial equity work within federally funded homelessness systems. In this context, documenting the breadth of equity-oriented strategies that communities have pursued—and preserving institutional memory of this work—is especially critical.

This report includes an overview of our approach followed by key findings and recommendations. To reduce potential risk to participating communities, this executive summary does not include **community-level findings** or identify specific cities or jurisdictions. Given the evolving federal policy environment and ongoing uncertainty surrounding funding requirements and equity-related initiatives, findings are presented in aggregate to highlight common strategies and themes while protecting the anonymity of individual communities. Individuals and organizations seeking additional details may contact the NCH for more information.

Approach

To understand how communities have responded to racial disparities in homelessness, we selected communities from among the nation's most populous, prioritizing representation over a broad geographic spread. For each location, we contacted CoC and Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) representatives to inquire about any measures they had implemented to advance racial equity in their homelessness response systems and whether they had observed any impact of those changes.

Most communities did not provide direct commentary on the effectiveness of their efforts. Respondents typically shared: 1) disaggregated data on homelessness by race and ethnicity 2) descriptions of actions taken, often directing us to local reports for further detail. These materials formed the basis of our community-level analysis. Ultimately, we examined racial equity efforts in homelessness response across 31 communities in the United States, spanning the Northeast (7), Midwest (7), South (8), and West (9).

The post-2018 landscape is marked by an increasing recognition of the intersectionality between racial equity and homelessness. It is critical to analyze effectiveness of interventions, policies, and community-driven initiatives that have emerged in response to the urgent need for racial equity in addressing homelessness.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several key themes emerged across the actions communities have taken. Each theme is presented below with progress, gaps, and recommendations for each theme.

PROGRESS/ *Start with the Data*

The most consistent action across communities was better data collection and analysis, including:

- **Disaggregating unsheltered and sheltered homelessness data by race/ethnicity.** The majority of Continuums of Care have begun disaggregating Point-in-Time (PIT) count and service use data by race/ethnicity in annual counts.
- **Creating new data dashboards.** Some even have frequently updated data dashboards that are also disaggregated by race. Multiple communities have invested in data infrastructure with a stated aim of tracking progress on equity goals.
- **Targeted data review of Coordinated Entry.** Communities are conducting focused analyses of their systems to identify inequities. Several jurisdictions reviewed their coordinated entry systems specifically to identify where racial disparities may be caused and to address those issues.

PROGRESS/ *Create Racial Equity Task Forces*

Communities across the country aimed to institutionalize racial equity work through groups of professionals who guide goal-setting and data review. These were either:

- **CoC-specific committees.** Several communities have established racial equity bodies specifically for their Continuum of Care. The mission of these committees varies, but often includes requesting and reviewing racial equity metrics to identify areas for improvement; providing or coordinating racial equity training for service providers; and following up with other committees or the CoC Board to assess whether equity goals are being met.

PROGRESS/ ***Create Racial Equity Task Forces*** *(cont.)*

- **Broader multi-system collaborations.** Though less common than CoC workgroups, some communities have created equity structures that extend beyond the CoC to include other public agencies and systems. The aim of this work is to establish collaborations to better address racial inequity in upstream systems that contribute to homelessness, including housing, education, labor, criminal justice, and health.

PROGRESS/ ***Reform Coordinated Entry***

Many communities are reworking their coordinated entry systems after finding racial disparities in prioritization:

- **Ending use of the VI-SPDAT.** Multiple communities have discontinued using the Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) after determining it may perpetuate racial disparities.
- **Comprehensive system reviews and redesigns.** Several communities have undertaken thorough reviews of their entire coordinated entry process. Some participated in a special HUD project for racial equity in coordinated entry. Some have created new tools for assessment and prioritization, while others adjusted the VI-SPDAT.
- **Adding equity-focused questions and assessments.** Specifically, there are communities modifying their assessment tools and processes to better capture disparities. For example, questions about reasons for homelessness, family structures, and zip codes have allowed communities to understand and account for the racialized risk of returning to homelessness, and include those measures in assessing vulnerability. Others have revised medical vulnerability questions, making them clearer and more effective for all people receiving services.

PROGRESS/ *Train and Build Capacity among Providers*

Another consistent pattern included reports of racial equity-related training and capacity building.

- **Training for service providers.** Information on the details was limited, but topics included understanding racism and applying knowledge about racial inequities to their work in homeless services. Often, these resulted from CoC investment in outside consultants/trainers. Some trainings were those broadly applicable in human service settings (e.g., cultural humility, implicit bias), while others focused specifically on the intersections of structural racism and homelessness.
- **Technical assistance.** Multiple communities are working with external partners to build capacity. Communities have partnered with organizations conducting studies on racial equity in the homeless response system to make necessary system adjustments. Some used external evaluators to conduct program and data analyses and for targeted support in developing racial equity implementation plans.

PROGRESS/ *Lift Up Lived Experience*

Communities described intentionally elevating the voices of people with lived experience of homelessness, particularly people of color. Details were limited on what these efforts looked like across communities, but they were often phrased as "centering" or "elevating" the "voices of people with lived experience." Across the field, this is often done through advisory boards for people with lived experience. How CoCs or organizations use these boards varies, from feedback on funding, hiring, and programmatic decisions to formalized decision-making power.

PROGRESS/ *Develop Equitable Funding Frameworks*

Communities reported using organizational-level funding decisions to advance racial equity in homelessness response. There were two areas where this stood out: investing in culturally specific services and incentivizing commitments to racial equity work across all organizations.

- **Funding culturally specific programs.** Communities are investing in community-based agencies and culturally specific programs. For example, equity initiatives in some jurisdictions included mentorship of Black-led organizations and inclusive procurement practices designed to increase funding to organizations serving communities of color.
- **Incorporating equity into funding decisions.** Some jurisdictions are using their funding processes to incentivize equity work. This included adding questions about racial equity to funding competitions, finding that this prompts organizations to consider racial equity, develop actions to address it, and follow through.



> Because of the complex underlying issues that drive high rates of homelessness among people of color, it is important to address multiple levels simultaneously. It is not possible to solve these issues at the programmatic level alone.
>
> **SPARC**, pg. 18

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Invest in Data Capacity*

- **Develop or enhance data systems** to capture real-time information on homelessness demographics, resource deployment, and program outcomes, thereby facilitating informed decision-making.
- In addition to traditional counts and real-time lists drawn from service systems, **incorporate estimates of doubled-up homelessness**, drawing on sources such as U.S. Department of Education data and American Community Survey–derived estimates.[3]

Notes on Data Collection

- **Understanding the scope of doubling up** is essential for accurately assessing need and aligning prevention and housing resources accordingly. This is particularly important for populations who face disparate barriers to shelter access or try to avoid being visibly unsheltered – including youth, LGBTQ+ individuals, and immigrants who may fear immigration enforcement.
- If communities observe declines in sheltered or unsheltered homelessness among Latinos or other groups targeted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), **those trends should be interpreted with caution**. Such findings should be paired with critical reflection and supplemental data to assess whether decreases reflect improved housing stability or shifts toward less visible forms of housing insecurity.

[3] Richard, M. K., Dworkin, J., Rule, K. G., Farooqui, S., Glendening, Z., & Carlson, S. (2024). Quantifying doubled-up homelessness: presenting a new measure using US Census microdata. Housing Policy Debate, 34(1), 3-24.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. *Foster Collaboration*

- Foster partnerships among local governments, community organizations, and businesses to **develop comprehensive strategies** that address homelessness with a focus on racial equity.
- Establish **formal coordination mechanisms** that include shared decision-making authority, consistent communication, and accountability structures to ensure all partners work toward measurable equity goals.

3. *Focus Upstream on Cross-System Collaboration*

- Examine how changes to **systems beyond homelessness services**—including healthcare, criminal justice, child welfare, and education—contribute to or prevent homelessness among communities of color. Implement coordinated discharge-planning protocols among homelessness systems, hospitals, correctional facilities, and foster care to prevent institutional exits that lead directly to homelessness.
- **Address root causes** of racially disproportionate homelessness by partnering with systems that serve as "upstream" intervention points, including eviction prevention programs, tenant rights organizations, and economic mobility initiatives that specifically target communities experiencing the greatest disparities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

4. *Enhance Homelessness Prevention Programs*

- Strengthen homelessness prevention strategies by focusing on equitable targeting, allocation, and prioritization of resources.
- Invest in flexible financial assistance programs that address the varied precipitating causes of housing instability, including emergency rental assistance, utility support, legal aid for eviction defense, and support for families facing loss of income or unexpected expenses.
- Analyze prevention program data by race/ethnicity to identify and address barriers to access and establish proactive outreach to communities at highest risk of homelessness.

5. *Design and Implement Sustainable Housing Solutions*

- Develop long-term strategies for affordable housing development and prioritize preservation efforts to maintain the existing affordable housing stock in communities. Advocate for zoning reforms and community land trusts that **promote housing stability in neighborhoods** with historical displacement of communities of color.
- Ensure housing solutions are **culturally responsive and safe**, incorporating trauma-informed design, accessibility for diverse family structures, and location in communities with adequate access to transportation, employment, education, and healthcare.
- Partner with culturally specific organizations in housing development and property management to create environments **where residents feel welcomed and supported**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

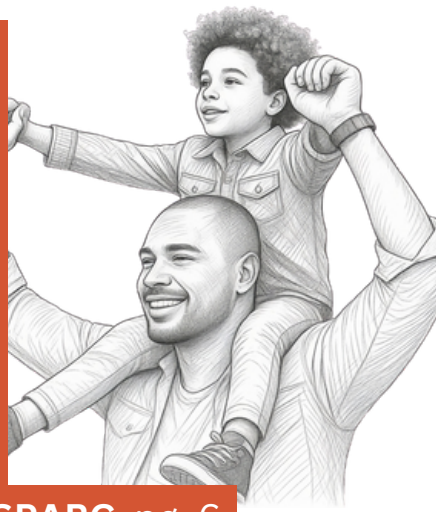
6. *Advocate for Stronger Discrimination Protections*

- Advocate for policy changes or enhancements that **support housing rights** and protect against discrimination, particularly regarding race and income. This includes supporting source-of-income discrimination protections, fair-chance housing policies that limit criminal-background screening, and robust, well-funded enforcement mechanisms for fair housing violations.
- Provide education and technical **assistance to landlords and property managers** on fair housing obligations while establishing clear consequences for discriminatory practices. Create **accessible reporting mechanisms** and legal support for individuals who experience housing discrimination.

7. *Continue to Elevate Community Voices*

Incorporate **feedback and perspectives from individuals** experiencing homelessness into program design and evaluation to ensure their unique experiences and needs are authentically represented.

> Although Black people comprise 13% of the general population in the United States and 26% of those living in poverty, they account for more than 40% of the homeless population, suggesting that poverty rates alone do not explain the over-representation.
>
> **SPARC**, pg. 6



CONCLUSION

Strides have been made across the country towards advancing racial equity in homelessness. However, persistent disparities in who becomes homeless necessitate a continued and coordinated effort. Engaging in these actionable steps may pave the way for effective change and contribute to a more equitable society for all.

In the current climate of increased resistance to diversity, equity, and inclusion at the federal level, it is more critical than ever for local communities and Continuums of Care to remain steadfast in their commitment to racial equity work, even if behind the scenes. The data are unambiguous: people of color, particularly Black and Indigenous people, experience homelessness at rates disproportionate to their representation in the general population. This is not a matter of political ideology—it is a matter of documented disparity that demands an evidence-based response.

Communities that have invested in work to reduce racial disparities have demonstrated their commitment to the values of racial equity. The progress documented here—from improved data systems to coordinated entry reform to culturally specific programming—represents real momentum that should not be abandoned.

When federal support wavers, local leadership becomes even more essential. Continuums of Care, municipal governments, philanthropic partners, and service provider organizations are responsible for maintaining equitable practices, ensuring that resources reach marginalized communities and that those most impacted are represented in decision-making.

This work is central to ending homelessness. We cannot effectively address homelessness without confronting the racial inequities that drive it. The recommendations outlined in this document offer communities various ways to deepen their commitment, strengthen their strategies, and continue their work to create homelessness response systems that serve all people equitably.

NATIONAL COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS

National Coalition for the Homeless advocates for increased public investment in affordable housing, services, and resources for housing stability. We are creating lasting systems change by developing leaders with lived experience who know how to permanently solve homelessness. We all want the same thing - a safe place to call home.

Thank you to all of the staff, interns, and other partners who have contributed to this study. Researchers and authors include: Caroline Roche, Kwali Mullen, Madison Pulice, Maya Harrington, Nathanaëlle Avillon, Paris Coleman, Sofia Ramirez, Dr. Rajni Shankar-Brown, NCH Director of Education and Research for Housing Justice, and Professor of the JBD Distinguished Chair of Social Justice Education. Thank you for your contribution to larger changes in the way people experiencing homelessness are seen and treated in our society.

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