

Executive Summary

While 7% of California's population identifies as Black, Black Californians represent more than a quarter of the state's homeless population. The overrepresentation of Black communities in the homeless population arises from centuries of anti-Black racism, embedded in policies and practices. To better understand the experiences of Black Californians experiencing homelessness, the UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative (BHII) examined the experience of Black Californians within the *California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness (CASPEH)*, the largest representative study of homelessness since the mid-1990s. UCSF BHII conducted the CASPEH between October 2021 and November 2022 and released their main findings in [June 2023](#). In this report, we present findings from survey data disaggregated by race and from in-depth interviews with Black participants. We review who experiences homelessness in the Black community, what precipitated their homelessness, their experiences while homeless, and what impacts their return to permanent housing. We present these findings to inform evidence-based solutions for preventing and ending homelessness for Black Californians.

WHO EXPERIENCES HOMELESSNESS IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

First, we explore who in the Black community experiences homelessness. We review demographic characteristics of Black Californians experiencing homelessness, their histories of homelessness, and their lifetime experiences of trauma.

■ **Black Californians are overrepresented in the homeless population.** Twenty percent of homeless adults identify Black as their sole racial identity and 6% as one of their identities. Thus, 26% identify Black as, compared to 7% in the overall California population.

■ **A higher proportion of Black Californians experiencing homelessness are cis-gender men, compared to other racial groups.** Three quarters of Black Californians are cis-gender men, compared to 64% of white Californians and 68% of those from other racial groups.

■ **Black Californians were more likely to have a history of incarceration in prison than other racial groups.** While Black Californians had similarly high likelihood of incarceration in jail at some point in their lives compared to those from other racial groups, they were more likely to report a prison stay. Forty-three percent of Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported a prison stay in their lifetime, compared to 31% of white and 37% of those from other races.

■ **Many Black Californians who were considered single (rather than part of a homeless family) had minor children who were not living with them.**

Adults experiencing homelessness are considered to be in a homeless family if living with their minor child. Twenty seven percent of those who were not considered to be part of a homeless family had minor children that weren't living with them; 9% were in Child Protective Services (CPS) custody and 7% had voluntarily relinquished their children due to homelessness. Black participants discussed relinquishing custody of children when faced with the threat of CPS intervention or homelessness.

■ **As with California's homeless population, Black Californians experiencing homelessness are aging.**

Over half (51%) of Black Californians who experience single adult homelessness are age 50 and older. With an insufficient social safety net and a lack of lifetime wealth to retire to, many Black Californians find themselves without a home later in life.

■ **Black individuals reported a lower lifetime prevalence of regular substance use than those from other racial groups experiencing homelessness.** Over half (58%) reported using illicit drugs regularly at some point in their lifetime; 74% of white and 65% of those from other races did so.

■ **Black individuals had a higher prevalence of severe mental health symptoms and problems than members of other racial groups.** They had a higher prevalence of hallucinations, suicide attempts, and mental health hospitalizations.

PATHWAYS TO HOMELESSNESS

Second, we explore experiences and challenges Black Californians faced prior to homelessness. We explore income and housing costs, experiences prior to losing their housing, and what supports could have prevented their homelessness.

■ **Criminal legal system involvement increased risk of homelessness.** Over one in five (22%) Black Californians entered homelessness directly from an institutional setting, primarily from carceral settings. Among Black Californians experiencing homelessness, 18% entered directly from a prison or extended jail stay compared to 10% of white Californians

and 15% of those from other racial groups. Carceral records posed barriers to employment and housing. Interrupting the prison and jail pipeline to homelessness could meaningfully decrease homelessness among Black Californians.

■ **More than three quarters (79%) of Black Californians experiencing homelessness entered homelessness from housing.** Nearly half (46%) entered from a non-leaseholding housing situation, living without the legal protections of a lease agreement. One in three (33%) were leaseholders in their last housing.

■ **Black Californians had extremely low incomes prior to homelessness.** Among those who entered from a leaseholding arrangement, the median monthly household income in the six months prior to homelessness was \$1200, lower than incomes from other racial groups experiencing homelessness. Among non-leaseholding Black Californians, the median monthly household income in the same period was \$960.

■ **Economic precarity preceded homelessness.** Among Black Californians, leaseholders' median monthly housing costs were \$675—more than half of the median monthly household income. While a large proportion of non-leaseholders (45%) didn't contribute to rent, those who did were cost burdened. Black participants discussed work and income fluctuations impacting their ability to keep up with housing costs.

■ **Anti-Black discrimination disrupted housing stability for Black Californians experiencing homelessness.** Some Black participants discussed having left their last housing situation due to discrimination. For others, discrimination disrupted employment, resulting in loss of income and inability to keep up with housing costs.

■ **Limited support was available to prevent homelessness for Black Californians.** While half (50%) of all Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported reaching out for help prior to homelessness, this help was primarily from friends and family who had limited resources to offer. Few reported seeking or receiving help from government agencies.

BLACK CALIFORNIANS' EXPERIENCES DURING HOMELESSNESS

Next, we examine Black Californians' experiences during homelessness. We explore shelter status, physical and behavioral health, experiences of violence during homelessness, income, incarceration, and discrimination.

- **While many Black Californians experiencing homelessness had health insurance and a regular source of healthcare, they experienced discrimination in healthcare settings.** Black participants discussed healthcare providers ignoring or disregarding symptoms of health conditions due to assumptions rooted in anti-Blackness.
- **Black Californians were more likely to experience a hospitalization for a physical health concern in the prior six months than white Californians: 28% versus 16%.**
- **Nearly a third (29%) of Black Californians assigned female at birth younger than 45 were pregnant at some point during this episode of homelessness.** Among white Californians assigned female at birth aged 18-44, 18% were.
- **Black Californians experiencing homelessness had a higher prevalence of severe mental health symptoms during homelessness compared to other racial groups.** Eighteen percent of Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported a hallucination in the prior 30 days; 8% of white and 11% of those from other racial groups did so.
- **Access to mental health counseling or treatment was limited during homelessness.** Among Black Californians who reported at least one mental health symptom in the prior 30 days, 35% received either counseling or medication.
- **Black Californians reported substance use during homelessness less frequently than white Californians and those from other racial groups experiencing homelessness.** Thirty-four percent of Black Californians reported either current, regular illicit drug use or heavy episodic alcohol use; 45% of white and 41% of those from other racial groups did so.

- **Over a quarter (28%) of Black Californians experienced a short-term jail stay during the current episode of homelessness.** This finding was similar to members of other racial groups. Many discussed being unfairly targeted by law enforcement because of their homelessness. These short-term jail stays interrupted Black Californians' progress toward obtaining stable employment and permanent housing.
- **Homelessness leaves individuals at risk for experiencing violence; this was no different for Black Californians.** Thirty three percent experienced physical or sexual violence during their current episode of homelessness. Thirty-two percent reported experiencing physical violence; 11% reported sexual violence.

BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS OF RETURNS TO PERMANENT HOUSING

Black Californians experiencing homelessness faced numerous barriers to exiting homelessness. We review the barriers to exits from homelessness and supports that could facilitate Black Californians' returns to housing.

- **Housing costs impeded returns to housing.** Eight in ten (82%) Black Californians experiencing homelessness noted housing costs as a barrier to returning to housing. This was the most commonly cited barrier. However, a smaller proportion of Black Californians than white or non-Black, non-white Californians reported this as a barrier. This likely reflects the myriad other structural (e.g., racial discrimination, carceral records) impediments to housing that Black Californians contend with. However, Black Californians reported housing costs more frequently than other barriers.
- **Lengthy waitlists and housing shortages delayed exits from homelessness for Black Californians.** Fifty-nine percent noted the length of waitlists as a barrier to returning to housing; 48% of white Californians and 49% of those from other races reported the same.



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■ **Discrimination and prior records posed barriers to exiting homelessness for Black Californians.**

Over half (51%) noted that discrimination impeded their search for housing. Black participants discussed ways in which their homelessness compounded the racial discrimination they faced in the housing market, further complicating their return to housing. Black Californians with carceral records described the ongoing impacts of those records on housing and employment opportunities.

■ **Many saw a lack of support finding housing a barrier to exiting homelessness.** Some Black participants described positive experiences with housing navigators. Housing navigators were helpful in a rental market in which they faced racism when seeking housing alone.

■ **Many were optimistic that modest financial interventions and housing navigation could support their exit from homelessness.** Eighty-five percent of Black Californians experiencing homelessness thought a shallow monthly subsidy would help them return to housing, 96% thought a lump sum payment would, 97% thought a housing voucher (similar to a Housing Choice Voucher) would, and 96% thought housing navigation would.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, we offer policy recommendations in six domains:

- Address economic marginalization.
- Increase access to affordable housing options.
- Strengthen homelessness prevention efforts.
- Address the criminal justice system to homelessness cycle.
- Support equitable health outcomes.
- Ensure the homelessness response system centers equity.