Toward Equity

Understanding Black Californians' Experiences of Homelessness

Findings from the California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness

Benioff Homelessness
and Housing Initiative

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University of California
San Francisco

February 2024

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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 (BHHI) 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 BHHI 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 Califorians, 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.

Introduction

On a single night in January 2023, more than 650,000 people experienced homelessness in the United States–a 12% increase from 2022.[1]

Homelessness is a crisis. However, not all Americans are equally likely to experience it. Black Americans are consistently overrepresented in the homeless population. In the California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness (CASPEH), a representative study of adults experiencing homelessness in California, we found Black people comprise 26% of people experiencing homelessness[2] despite making up only 7% of Californians.[3] They are overrepresented by almost fourfold.

In this report, we delve into data from CASPEH to understand Black Californians' experiences of homelessness. We explore who in the Black community experiences homelessness, how they lost their housing, their experiences while homeless, and the barriers they face to regaining housing.

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FIGURE 1 Overrepresentation of Black Californians in People Experiencing Homelessness

7% of Californians identify as Black

26% of Californians experiencing homelessness identify as Black
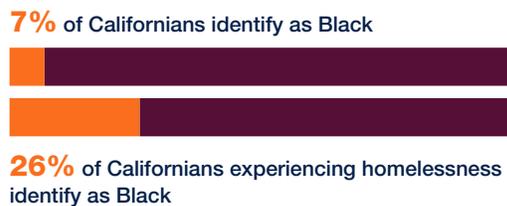
Anti-Black racism is a term used to describe a set of beliefs, ideologies, and practices (both individual and institutional) based on the idea that those with Black skin are inherently inferior to those with white or brown skin.[4] It is a system held in place by anti-Black policies, institutions, and ideologies that systematically marginalize Black people.[5,6] The ongoing effects of structurally racist policies, anti-Black racism, and discrimination have led, directly and indirectly, to an increased risk of homelessness among Black Americans. In *Toward a New Understanding*, we wrote that homelessness arises due to an interaction between structural factors, individual vulnerabilities, and the presence or absence of a social safety net. In the United States, anti-Black racism pervades each of these. Anti-Black racism runs through every structure in American society from the availability of affordable housing to income inequality, the education and criminal justice systems. To better understand the disproportionate impact of homelessness on the Black community, it is important to understand the historical context of how anti-Black racism has shaped housing in the United States, as one can trace the structures that rendered Black American overrepresentation in homelessness to slavery.

The overrepresentation of Black people in the homeless population arises from 400 years of anti-Black racism entrenched in the structures, institutions, ideologies, and social norms of American life, starting with slavery. Slavery was an emotional, spiritual, and physical state of homelessness for enslaved Africans.[7] While enslaved Americans are not considered to have been homeless by the modern definition, enslavers often kept enslaved people in huts with no doors, windows, or furniture, without agency or security.[8,9] Today, these conditions would meet the definition of homelessness.[10] Although slavery ended in 1865, the terror of white supremacy did not. Southern plantation owners were afraid that the Southern economy would collapse after emancipation and needed to find a way to stop Black people from assimilating while also securing their labor.[11] The system of Jim Crow segregation – a set of legal and social codes that dictated the complete separation of Black and white people and the relegation of Black people as second class citizens – emerged out of this "need."[12] Through legal mechanisms and terroristic violence, Black Southerners were forced to work in sharecropping jobs. This kept the Southern economy almost entirely the same as before emancipation, with white Southerners owning the land and monopolizing the money, power, and prestige, while Black Southerners were bound by a limited set of roles and social interactions with white people. The result was the systematic creation of a class of Black people who were disenfranchised, uneducated, poor, and propertyless.[13]

Black families and community members searched for places where they could be safe from the terrors of white supremacy and violence. This often meant moving quickly, leaving behind their houses in search of something new, which left many of those fleeing without a home.[14] At the turn of the 20th century, large numbers of labor-seeking Black migrants fled racial terror in the Jim Crow South and arrived in the North and the West where they confronted, not a great promise land, but a hostile landscape.[15,16] This Great Migration caused panic and hostility to grow among white communities, especially as Black families attempted to move into white neighborhoods. In response, white communities reacted through violence and forced residential confinement of newly arrived Black households into Black enclaves in a system that would soon be codified into law as "redlining."[17]

Redlining is the practice of denying services, either directly or through selectively raising prices, to residents of certain areas based on the racial or ethnic composition of those areas. In the 1930s, The Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) created redlining maps as part of a City Survey Program across the country. These maps assigned grades of A through D to different neighborhoods with A (green) marked "Best" and D (red) marked "Hazardous."[18] What differentiated an A from a D grade was almost solely the racial composition of these neighborhoods. Majority Black neighborhoods were marked D and neighborhoods with a higher ratio of Black people to white people were marked C (yellow) or "Definitely Declining." Property values depended upon the grade of the neighborhood.[19]

Through government-subsidized loans made available in the 1940 and 1950s, white families were able to buy houses at the fringes of the city in the newly developing "whites only" suburbs, or A-grade neighborhoods. Black families were refused these loans or the houses that the loans could purchase. Marked "Hazardous," property values of all-Black neighborhoods were considered so low that many property owners left them to deteriorate. In this way, the color line was redrawn with Black communities renting deteriorating properties in the center of the city and white families moving to the newly built suburbs, while middle- and upper-class white families allowed middle-class Black people to move out of the deteriorating center cities into the neighborhoods that white families had left behind. Thus a dual housing market was created – one for white people and one for Black people. Black families who could not afford to purchase homes in Black neighborhoods were placed in high-rise, poorly built public housing projects.

These changes in the housing market were backed by a set of policies: the federal government would not insure mortgages to houses in Black communities; real estate covenants legally restricted Black people from renting or owning homes in certain communities; public housing projects were legally required to be segregated by race.[20] Through these policies and practices, Black communities across the country were made into areas of concentrated poverty, where the majority of residents are living in poverty.

A throughline runs between the policies of redlining, segregation, and disinvestment to the disproportionate representation of Black Americans in today's homeless population.

The grade of the neighborhood not only dictated the property value of houses in the area, but also the type of investments that the city made towards developing those neighborhoods, the kinds of businesses that opened up shops there, and whether banks would provide loans to residents. Facing an increased demand for and shortage of housing, Black people were made to pay higher prices for rents and mortgages, offered high-interest rates for loans, and confined in the borders of the city through these redlining practices.

Since then, housing policies, even those that were "race-neutral," were used to ensure that resources, housing, and opportunities excluded Black families.[21] In their book *American Apartheid*, Douglas Massy and Nancy Denton argue that the "ghettoization" of Black America" was the result of this conscious reorganization of space by white people in the North and West, and maintained through discriminatory practices in real estate (redlining and steering) and financial institutions (redlining maps) as well as white flight to the suburbs and the subsequent substandard educational, health care, and employment opportunities created for Black people.[22]

A throughline runs between the policies of redlining, segregation, and disinvestment to the disproportionate representation of Black Americans in today's homeless population. Homeownership is a fundamental means of building wealth for Americans. Policies that excluded Black households from homeownership consequently excluded Black households from the intergenerational stability and wealth-building that comes through home ownership. The racial wealth gap in this country is extreme and widening. The median white family had $184,000 in wealth in 2019 compared to just $23,000 for the median Black family.[23] Wealth can protect families and social networks. Those with wealth are in a far better position to absorb unexpected life events and financial blows such as the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, or the loss of income. Wealthy families are also in a much better position to subsidize buying or renting a home for family members who cannot afford to do so themselves or to help family members who suffer unexpected blows that affect their housing.

In 2023, the US Census Bureau found the largest homeownership gap in a decade: 75% of white households own their homes compared to 45% of Black households.[24] In addition to building intergenerational wealth, homeownership can provide intergenerational housing stability. Homeowners have agency over who can stay with them and how they use their homes, providing housing stability not only to the homeowners but also to their families and extended social networks. Thus, differential rates of home ownership and intergenerational wealth built through years of policies set the stage for the disparate impact we see today.

While the Fair Housing Act of 1968 rendered these policies illegal, Black Americans continue to live with the consequences. In many cities, neighborhoods today are segregated along the same lines drawn in the 1930s. Today, segregation is reified through everyday acts of discrimination. Black households are steered by real estate agents into Black neighborhoods and away from white neighborhoods, offered higher interest rates and subprime mortgages,[25] and are 1.8 times more likely to be denied loans.[26] Black renters, particularly Black women renters, are much more likely to be threatened with eviction and more likely to be evicted from their homes–after controlling for other circumstances.[27] Because evictions appear on tenant screening reports, they become a way for property owners to deny housing to Black households legally, contributing to barriers Black households face in finding housing. There is ample evidence that Black households with the same qualifications are less likely to be offered rental housing compared to similar white households–leading Black households to have to pay more for the same quality of housing.[28]

UNDERSTANDING RACE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

In the United States, we tend to define race as a division among people that is deep, essential, biological, genetic, and unchanging. This idea of race assumes that simple external differences rooted in biology are linked to other, more complex internal differences like athletic ability, intelligence, math or science skills, even self-restraint, and morality. But 150 years of research into the concept of race and genetic variation conclude unequivocally that there is no biological basis for what we call race. Rather, race is a socially constructed idea that people ascribe, incorrectly, to biology. There is more genetic variation between people of the same racial group than between people of different racial groups. The concept of Blackness as a distinct racial category was an *ideology* created by enslavers and policymakers in the 1600s to justify the institution of slavery. If enslaved Africans could be cast as biologically inferior – closer to animals than humans – then slavery could be cast as a necessary form of control and the very profitable plantation economy could continue to flourish. In other words, race rose out of institutional arrangements, historical practices, and ideologies rooted in power and inequality.[29]

Even though race is socially constructed, racial inequality and racial injustice is real. As a dominant normative blueprint in the United States, race profoundly shapes the opportunities, constraints, and possibilities with which groups must contend, as well as the distribution of money, power, and prestige in society.

Anti-Black racism has led to an increased risk of homelessness in other ways. One in four Black men will spend time incarcerated in their lives; they are more likely to spend time in prison than college.[30] This is not because Black communities commit more crimes, but because Black people are surveilled by the police at higher rates and sentenced more often and for longer than people of other races.[31] An assumption of criminality undergirds the ideology of racism and dates back to slavery.[32] Having a history of incarceration dramatically increases one's risk of homelessness by constraining educational and employment opportunities, the ability to receive certain benefits, and by increasing barriers to housing.[33]

Studies show that Black children are disciplined more harshly in schools for the same behaviors as white children,[34,35] sent to detention, and tagged as having special needs more often than white children. These are associated with increased risk of not completing high school and becoming a target of the carceral system, which can limit occupational and income opportunities and pave the way to homelessness.

The trauma caused by living in a racist society can increase the risk that Black individuals experience individual challenges that leave them at higher risk for homelessness. However, Black Americans live with the consequences of anti-Black racism in all aspects of their lives, which increases their risk of homelessness, even absent other vulnerabilities. With this context, we explore who in the Black community experiences homelessness, how they came to be homeless, what their experiences are while homeless, and what barriers they face when trying to return to housing.

CASPEH is the largest representative study of homelessness in the United States since the 1990s.

ABOUT THE STUDY

The California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness (CASPEH) is the largest representative study of homelessness in the United States since the 1990s. The UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative collected data for the mixed methods study between October 2021 and November 2022. Study staff administered 3,200 questionnaires and conducted 365 in-depth interviews with adults experiencing homelessness throughout California. The study aims to understand who experiences homelessness, their pathways to homelessness, their experiences during homelessness, and their barriers to regaining permanent housing. The study included administered questionnaires and seven interrelated in-depth interview (qualitative) substudies. For more information about study methods, population, questionnaire domains, qualitative sub-study topics, and eligibility criteria please see CASPEH's report–*Toward a New Understanding: The California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness*.[36]

ABOUT CASPEH METHODS

To obtain a sample representative of adults 18 years and older who experience homelessness, we used a combination of venue-based sampling (purposive sampling from places that people experiencing homelessness might be, in proportion to the likelihood of the individual being there) and respondent-driven sampling (methods that rely on social networks to identify those who might be underrepresented in venue-based sampling). We include two caveats. First, young adults (age 18-24) who experience homelessness are an important but distinct group. Effective research on homeless youth use different methods to recruit representative samples. To enhance our ability to find young adults, we relied on respondent-driven sampling, but do not make claims that we achieved representative sampling of this group. Secondly, due to security requirements at domestic violence (DV) shelters, we used respondent-driven sampling (rather than venue-based screening) to find those staying in DV shelters. This may have led to lack of representation of this population.

To understand the specific experiences of homelessness for Black Californians, we recruited participants who identified as Black for a qualitative sub-study focused on the Black experience. For those participants, we focused the interviews on participants' experiences of anti-Black racism; how anti-Black racism impacted their journey into homelessness and access to housing and other services; and what strategies they deployed to navigate homelessness and housing. We constructed the interview guide collaboratively with a subcommittee of BHHI faculty and staff, and people with lived experience of homelessness who identified as Black. The interviewers for this substudy all identified as Black. Many participants recruited for one of the six other qualitative substudies (Barriers to Returns to Housing; Behavioral Health Among People Experiencing Homelessness; Precipitants to Homelessness; Latino/x Experiences of Homelessness; Incarceration and Homelessness; Intimate Partner Violence and Homelessness) identified as Black. Although anti-Black racism was not the focus of those studies, many Black participants discussed similar issues. In this report, we include data from the questionnaire and from Black participants in any of the qualitative interviews when discussing issues related to the experience of homelessness for those who are Black.

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Who In the Black Community Experiences Homelessness

In this chapter, we explore the demographic characteristics of Black Californians experiencing homelessness, their histories of homelessness, and lifetime experiences of trauma. Anti-Black racism is a form of structural vulnerability. These vulnerabilities translate to fewer material resources, narrower social networks, and frayed safety nets. They create systematic barriers to accessing institutional support or getting needed resources. To understand Black Californians' experiences of homelessness, we examined their lifetime experiences with mental health, violence, incarceration, and substance use.
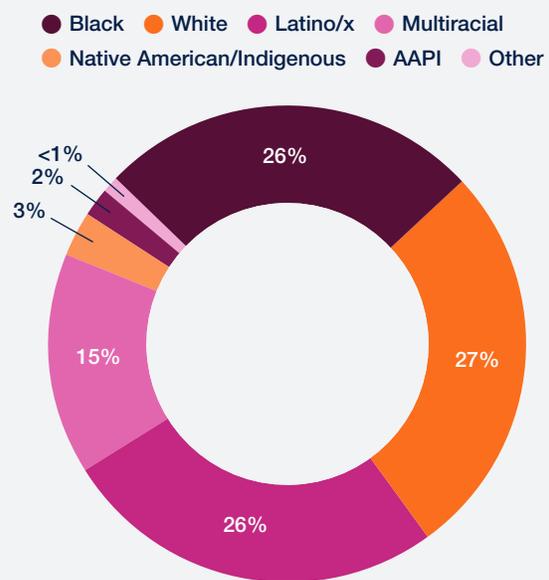
RACE

To understand the experience of Black Californians, it was important to first identify who is Black. We asked participants to share their racial identities. Our race measure differs from measures used in the US Census and the Homeless Point In Time (PIT) Counts in two ways. First, unlike the census and the PIT, which ask one question about racial identity and a separate question about Hispanic origin, we constructed one race measure for CASPEH. Our race measure treats Latino/x participants as a racial group rather than an ethnicity and includes expanded racial categories. Second, along with allowing participants to choose "all that apply," we included the category "multiracial."

Our measure treats those who identify as Black as their sole racial identity and those who identify as Black as one of their racial identities as a single racial group. In the United States, those who are perceived as having any African ancestry, even if they are of mixed descent, are treated as Black in social life. Informally, this racial categorization is known as the 'one-drop rule,' which asserts that one drop of "Black blood" makes a person Black.[37] Due to structural, institutional, and interpersonal racism, people with any Black racial identity have more

similar health outcomes to one another than to other racial groups.[38] Therefore, in our report, we defined the category Black as those who identify Black as their sole racial identity (20% of Black Californians experiencing homelessness) and those who identify Black as one of their racial identities (6% of Black Californians experiencing homelessness).

With this categorization, the proportion of Californians' experiencing homelessness who are Black is similar to the proportion who are white and Latinx, which reflects a dramatic overrepresentation for Black Californians, who make up only 7% of the population of California.

FIGURE 2 Racial Identities of People Experiencing Homelessness in California

- Black
- White
- Latino/x
- Multiracial
- Native American/Indigenous
- AAPI
- Other

26%
27%
26%
15%
3%
2%
<1%

Twenty percent identified Black as their sole racial identity; 6% as one of their racial identities.
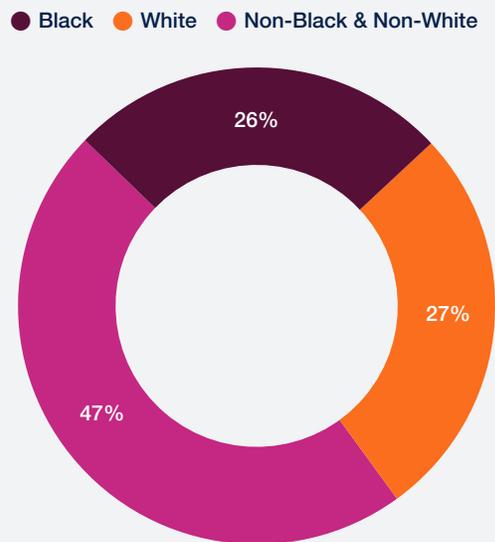
While this report focuses on Black Californians experiencing homelessness, we do note where their experience may differ from that of members of other racial identities. Because we recognize that those who are non-white may face challenges related to racism, we compared those who are Black to those who are white and those who are neither Black nor white (non-Black, non-white).

FIGURE 3 Racial Identities of People Experiencing Homelessness in California (3 Categories)

● Black ● White ● Non-Black & Non-White

26%

27%

47%

FAMILY STRUCTURE

Of Black Californians experiencing homelessness, 90% were single adults, 6% were adults in families (adults living with minor children), and 4% were transition age young adults (18- to 24-year-olds not living with minor children).[39] The median age of children in Black homeless families was 4 years. This is younger than the median age of either white or non-Black, non-white children (8 years).

Despite the fact that only 6% of participants were considered "adults in families," 27% of Black Californians who were not classified as adults in homeless families had minor children who were not currently living with them. An adult may not have custody of their minor children for several reasons. They may never have been a custodial parent. Child Protective Services (CPS) may have forcibly removed their child. One participant how she had decided to give her first child to her aunt due to domestic violence at home and the threat of CPS intervention. She shared: "Me and my first baby's dad, I got a little bit of troubles. He had to have a CPS case and stuff. So, I just called [my aunt] and told her, 'Just come to my kids.' And I just signed my kids to her." Losing custody of her child was a trauma from which she never recovered. She talked about being drug free until the sorrow of losing her child became too much to bear. It was at that point that she began using non-prescribed opioids.

FIGURE 4 Family Structure by Racial Identity

● Single adults ● Adults in families ● TAY

	Single adults	Adults in families	TAY
Black	90%	6%	4%
White	95%	3%	2%
Non-Black & Non-White	86%	11%	3%
Overall	90%	7%	3%

There is strong evidence of racial disparities in the child welfare system. This system more closely surveilles Black families; Black children are at high risk of being targets of investigation and removed from their homes at a higher frequency.[40] Being in the child welfare system is itself traumatic, and Black children may face anti-Black racism within the system.[41] Homelessness places parents at risk of their children being removed by CPS due to their homelessness.[42] Black children in homeless families may face compounded risk, with increased risk due to the increased surveillance of both Black families and homeless families. We found that 8% of Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported having a minor child currently in the child welfare system; 9% of those not classified as being in a homeless family (i.e., homeless single adults or young adults) did. Fifteen percent reported that they had ever had a child taken by the child welfare system; 15% of Black Californians not classified as being in homeless families had. These were similar to other racial groups.

Parents facing homelessness may relinquish custody to protect their child from the experience of homelessness. This choice may be due to concerns about the impact of homelessness on the child, the lack of resources (such as family shelter) to keep the child safe, and the concern that homelessness may increase the child's risk of removal by CPS. Some may wonder, if a family member of a homeless adult had the resources to take in a child, why wouldn't they also bring that child's parent into their household? The impact of anti-Black racism toward the Black community prevented many from building intergenerational wealth or buying houses, leaving them without the resources or agency to protect all their loved ones from homelessness. Almost one in ten Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported that they ever voluntarily separated from their child due to their homelessness (9% of all Black Californians, 9% of Black single adults and TAY). These adults reported that the system considered them as an adult in a homeless family, even when they were

a parent, temporarily separated from their child due to their homelessness. Black women who were classified as single adults or TAY were more likely to report that they currently voluntarily relinquished custody of their children due to homelessness (20%) or currently had children in CPS custody (14%) compared to Black men classified as single adults or TAY (3% and 8% respectively). These numbers were similar across racial groups; however, non-Black non-white women classified as single adults or TAY more frequently reported currently having children in CPS custody (28%).

Overall, 21% of all Black adults not classified as being in homeless families (either classified as single adults or TAY) have ever voluntarily or involuntarily given up a child due to homelessness: 15% due to having children in the child welfare system and 9% who voluntarily gave up custody.

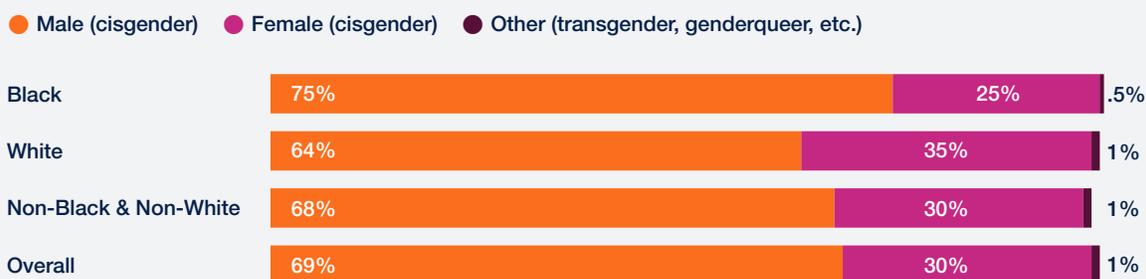The homeless system does not classify these parents as adults in homeless families, so they are neither given any priority for homeless families nor appropriate resources. In doing so, the homeless system may misunderstand these people's roles as parents. We heard from many who had relinquished custody that they continued to parent and would not accept housing options that didn't include their children.

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" I've been [homeless for] ten months. [They haven't offered me services of any kind]...They [Housing Authority] got to put our name in the system and it's like a lottery....I was supposed to be placed in another [place]…But they never did and…my daughter ended up getting adopted out. So I'm just sitting here waiting, trying to fight it out until I can get this place so I can get my baby to come home. "

FIGURE 5 Gender Identities of People Experiencing Homelessness in California by Racial Identity

● Male (cisgender)   ● Female (cisgender)   ● Other (transgender, genderqueer, etc.)

	Male (cisgender)	Female (cisgender)	Other
Black	75%	25%	.5%
White	64%	35%	1%
Non-Black & Non-White	68%	30%	1%
Overall	69%	30%	1%

Cumulative percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Three quarters (75%) of Black Californians experiencing homelessness identified as cisgender men, compared to 64% for white and 68% for non-Black non-white Californians experiencing homelessness. Black men are at particularly high risk of homelessness via the prison-to-homelessness, unemployment-to-homelessness, and school-to-homelessness pipelines. They are punished more harshly in schools, have a harder time bypassing racial discrimination in hiring practices to find steady work, are more likely to be targets of police surveillance and enter into the carceral system, and are more likely to face racial discrimination when attempting to find and stay in housing. Our qualitative data revealed that the norms of American masculinity–being able to take care of oneself without asking for help–put Black men experiencing homelessness in a particularly hard situation. Many felt uneasy about asking for help from family or friends because they felt that they would be a burden and should be able to self-resolve. Black women, on the other hand, are more likely to experience hidden homelessness–sleeping on couches or staying in places not meant for human habitation.

Half a percent of Black Californians identified as non-binary, transgender, or gender non-conforming. Eight percent identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual or another non-heterosexual identity.

AGE

The homeless population is aging. The median age for Black Californians experiencing homelessness is 50 years–similar to that of white Californians (50), but older than non-Black non-white Californians (43). Over half (51%) of Black single adults experiencing homelessness were 50 years or older, similar to white adults (50%) but greater than 35% of non-Black non-white adults.

EDUCATION

Thirty-two percent of Black Californians experiencing homelessness had not completed either a GED or a high school degree; 26% had a high school degree. Almost half (43%) had post high school education, 31% had some college education, and 12% had a college degree. That 43% had some college education and yet became homeless speaks to the many structural barriers to economic success that Black Americans face.

HISTORY OF HOMELESSNESS AND LENGTH OF CURRENT EPISODE

Black Californians reported long and recurring episodes of homelessness. The median length of homelessness for all Black Californians was 17 months, shorter than that of white Californians (27 months) or non-Black non-white Californians (24 months). However, Black Californians were more likely to have had multiple episodes of homelessness. Prior to this episode, 71% of Black Californians experienced homelessness compared to 62% of white and 54% of non-Black non-white Californians. Black single adults (72%) and TAY (78%) were more likely to report recurrent episodes of homelessness than Black adults in families (59%). While 72% of Black single adults experienced multiple episodes of homelessness, 62% of white and 56% of non-Black non-white Californians did. Seventy eight percent of Black TAY reported experiencing multiple episodes of homelessness compared to 51% of white and 59% of non-Black non-white Californians.

CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

Chronic homelessness is defined as both (1) experiencing homelessness for at least 12 months or having four or more episodes of homelessness in the prior three years that together total more than 12 months and (2) having a disabling condition. Thirty two percent of Black Californians experiencing homelessness met the criteria for chronic homelessness. This percentage varies by family type: 34% of Black single adults, 19% of Black adults in families, and 16% of Black TAY. If we were to measure chronic homelessness only by time period and not disabling condition, 68% of Black Californians experiencing homelessness qualify.

EXPERIENCES OVER THE LIFE COURSE

Homelessness occurs because unfavorable structural conditions amplify individual vulnerabilities. Black people live in a world constructed with anti-Black racism at its foundation, living with the consequences of anti-Black racism in all aspects of their lives. Even absent other vulnerabilities, these conditions increase their risk of homelessness. However, the trauma caused by living in a racist society can increase the risk that Black individuals experience individual challenges that leave them at higher risk for homelessness. In-depth interviews revealed that Black participants faced precarity in many ways—struggling to find stable, well-paying work, living in sub-par housing in need of repair, experiencing constant surveillance by police, and discrimination in all aspects of their life. To understand Black Californians' experiences of homelessness, we examined their lifetime experiences of intergenerational trauma, incarceration, exposure to violence, substance use, and mental health problems.

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Intergenerational Trauma

In the introduction, we outlined how the overrepresentation of Black communities in the homeless population arises from anti-Black racism entrenched in the structures, institutions, ideologies, and social norms of American life, starting with slavery. This history has come at an enormous cost to Black families across generations. Slavery, Jim Crow, redlining, socially constructed intergenerational poverty, and racism are all examples of collective trauma. In in-depth interviews, Black participants shared how their lives were marked by the trauma of their parents and grandparents. This trauma affected their housing stability and experiences with homelessness. One participant shared how their own experience with homelessness was a result of an unstable childhood marked by sexual abuse, housing insecurity, childhood homelessness, and placement in foster care.

> *I was in the foster care system six-and-a-half all the way to 18… I was being abused sexually, mentally, and physically by my stepdads. So I came down here…with her [my mom], and I've been homeless on the streets with her until six-and-a-half when I got in the system. I was bouncing around…group homes, foster homes. I've been in 16 different placements throughout the time of me being in there. Six to 18.*
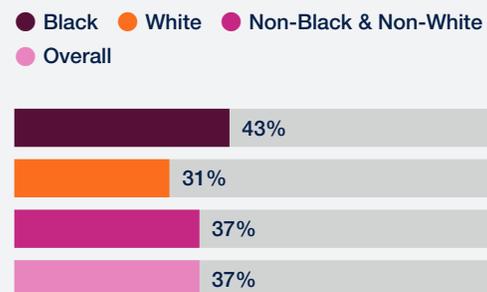
Incarceration

Similar to members of other racial groups, over three quarters (78%) of Black Californians experiencing homelessness spent time in jail at some point in their lives. Black Californians experiencing homelessness were more likely to report a prison stay (43%) than white (31%) or non-Black non-white Californians (37%). This finding is more common for Black men (53%) than Black women (15%). Jail stays are ubiquitous in people experiencing homelessness, partly because of the criminalization of homelessness. Spending time in state or federal prison is a major risk factor for future homelessness because of the impact of criminal justice records on every aspect of life: educational opportunities, employment, and housing. Black people, particularly Black men, are much more likely to spend time in prison than white people. Black communities are surveilled by police more often and more harshly. Black people are arrested more often and sentenced for longer periods than non-Black people.

Exposure to Violence

Seventy percent of Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported lifetime experiences of physical violence. White Californians were more likely to report having experienced physical violence in their life (79%) than Black Californians. About one fourth of Black Californians (24%) reported lifetime experiences with sexual violence, on par with other racial groups.

FIGURE 6 Lifetime Prevalence of Prison Incarceration by Race

● Black ● White ● Non-Black & Non-White
● Overall

Black	43%
White	31%
Non-Black & Non-White	37%
Overall	37%

Substance Use Over the Life Course

Cumulative trauma exposure is linked to poor self-rated mental health as well as substance use disorders.[43,44] Given the lifetime experiences of incarceration 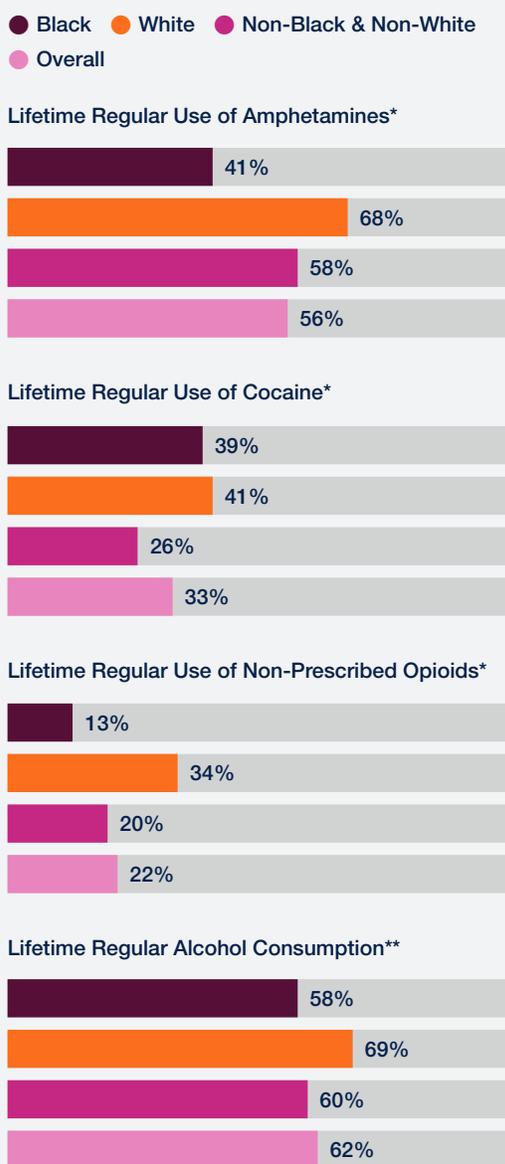and interpersonal violence experienced by Black Californians experiencing homelessness, it is not surprising that they reported high prevalence of use of illicit substances and alcohol, severe mental health symptoms, PTSD diagnoses, and suicide attempts.

We asked participants to report whether they used any illicit substances (non-prescribed amphetamines like methamphetamine, cocaine, or non-prescribed opioids) regularly, defined as three times a week or more for a period of time, at any point in their lives. We asked them to report which drugs they had used regularly. Over half (58%) of Black Californians experiencing homelessness had at some point in their lives used non-prescribed amphetamines, cocaine, or non-prescribed opioids regularly. This proportion was lower than white (74%) or non-Black non-white (65%) Californians reported. Lower proportions of Black Californians reported having ever used either opioids or methamphetamine regularly than those from white or non-Black non-white backgrounds. Forty one percent of Black Californians reported regular use of methamphetamine at some point in their life compared to 68% for white Californians and 58% for non-Black non-white Californians; 13% reported ever having used non-prescribed opioids regularly compared to 34% for white Californians and 20% for non-Black non-white Californians. Black Californians were similarly likely to report having ever used cocaine regularly (39%) as white Californians (41%), but more likely than non-Black non-white Californians (26%).

We asked participants if there ever was a time when they drank alcohol three or more times per week to the point where they felt buzzed or drunk, or drank less frequently but more heavily for short periods (like getting drunk on the weekends). Over half (58%) of Black Californians reported that they had done so in their lifetime compared to 69% of white Californians and 60% of non-Black non-white Californians.

Lifetime regular illicit substance use and alcohol use was substantially higher in people experiencing homelessness than in the general (non-homeless) population, reflecting how substance use problems increase the risk of homelessness, by interrupting social relationships, educational and employment opportunities, and by increasing the risk of criminal

FIGURE 7 Proportion of Participants Who Reported Regular Substance Use Ever in Their Lives by Race

● Black   ● White   ● Non-Black & Non-White
● Overall

Lifetime Regular Use of Amphetamines*

Black	41%
White	68%
Non-Black & Non-White	58%
Overall	56%

Lifetime Regular Use of Cocaine*

Black	39%
White	41%
Non-Black & Non-White	26%
Overall	33%

Lifetime Regular Use of Non-Prescribed Opioids*

Black	13%
White	34%
Non-Black & Non-White	20%
Overall	22%

Lifetime Regular Alcohol Consumption**

Black	58%
White	69%
Non-Black & Non-White	60%
Overall	62%

* Regular illicit drug use is 3 times a week or more.

** Regular alcohol use is 3 times a week or more until drunk, or less frequently but more heavily for shorter periods.

legal system involvement. However, Black Americans bear a significantly higher risk of homelessness based on structural factors due to anti-Black racism, which translates into some Black Americans becoming homeless with fewer individual risks than white Americans. This may partially explain that while looking within the population of people experiencing homelessness, there is a lower prevalence of illicit substance use among Black Californians than either white or non-Black non-white Californians.

Mental Health Over the Life Course

To assess whether participants had experienced mental health problems throughout their life, we focused on symptoms, rather than diagnoses, because symptoms don't rely on access to medical care, while diagnoses do. We asked whether participants had ever had a significant period in their life where they had experienced serious symptoms of depression (sadness, hopelessness, loss of interest, difficulty with daily functioning); anxiety (uptight, unreasonably worried, inability to feel relaxed); hallucinations (saw things, heard voices that others didn't hear or see); or trouble understanding, concentrating, or remembering. Among Black participants, 83% reported that they had experienced at least one of these serious mental health symptoms over their life course (72% depression; 68% anxiety; 46% trouble remembering; 31% hallucinations). One fourth (26%) of Black Californians reported experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder. Black Californians reported similar experiences with most mental health symptoms as non-Black Californians, but were more likely to report having experienced hallucinations in their lifetime (31%) than white (19%) and non-Black non-white (21%) Californians.

FIGURE 8 Attempted Suicide in Lifetime, by Race

● Black ● White ● Non-Black & Non-White ● Overall

Black	37%
White	31%
Non-Black & Non-White	28%
Overall	31%
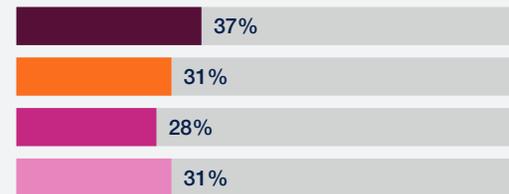
Black Californians were more likely to indicate that they had ever attempted suicide (37%) than white (31%) or non-Black, non-white Californians (28%). Black Californians were similarly more likely to report that they had been hospitalized for a mental health condition in their lifetime (32%) compared to 26% for white Californians and 24% for non-Black non-white Californians. The high prevalence of hallucinations, suicide attempts, and mental health hospitalizations reflect the overlapping experiences of trauma Black participants have gone through over their lives, the unrelenting everyday experiences of anti-Black racism they experience in institutions and social interactions, and the lack of support structures during crises.

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SUMMARY

This chapter explored who in the Black community experiences homelessness in California. Due to structural anti-Black racism, Black Californians are overrepresented in the homeless population. Black Californians live with anti-Black racism in all aspects of their lives, which increases their risk of homelessness, even absent other vulnerabilities. At the same time, anti-Black racism, poverty, and intergenerational trauma can increase the risk that Black individuals experience individual challenges leaving them at higher risk for homelessness. Anti-Black racism in the child welfare system makes Black families—especially Black women—frequent targets of surveillance by Child Protective Services (CPS). On the precipice of homelessness, many Black families find themselves unable to keep their children with them, a trauma from which many never recover. While the majority of Black homeless adults are single without minor children, many participants reported having children that no longer lived with them due to being homeless. Black men are subject to a particularly punishing form of gendered racism, especially those who are extremely low income. They are more likely to be targets of the criminal justice system, more likely to face racial discrimination when attempting to find jobs and housing, and more likely to feel that they should be able to resolve homelessness on their own without asking for help. The Black homeless population–like the homeless population as a whole–is aging. The lack of generational wealth, along with centuries of being depressed into service industry jobs, means that Black Californians can work their whole lives and still find themselves without a home in their later years. Finally, Black Californians had high occurrences of trauma over the life course including physical and sexual violence and incarceration. High rates of trauma often lead to substance use and mental health symptoms. Still, Black Californians reported regular substance use at a lower rate than white or non-Black non-white people experiencing homelessness. A high proportion reported serious mental health symptoms, a mental health hospitalization, or a suicide attempt at some point in their lives. Black Californians reported attempted suicide at a higher rate than the sample as a whole, pointing to the devastating effects of experiencing structural and individual traumas while also lacking adequate mental health care. Together, these data paint a picture of who in the Black community experiences homelessness in California.

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Pathways to Homelessness

To inform solutions to prevent homelessness, we need to understand the experiences and challenges Black Californians faced prior to becoming homeless. In this section, we explore where participants lived prior to homelessness, their household income and housing costs, the experiences they had prior to losing their housing, and what supports could have averted their episode of homelessness.

ENTRANCES TO HOMELESSNESS

We asked participants where they had been immediately prior to homelessness. We classified these as either in an institutional setting or housing. If housed, we asked whether it was a housing situation for which they had legal rights (such as having their name on a lease, a sub-lease, or mortgage) or whether they were doubled up with friends or family. We define leaseholders as those named on a formal housing agreement (i.e., a rental agreement or a mortgage).

More than one in five (22%) Black Californians experiencing homelessness entered homelessness directly from an institutional setting, higher than white Californians (15%) and similar to other racial groups (19%). The majority of institutional entrances were from carceral settings, which drive the difference in institutional entrances between Black and white Californians. Among Black Californians, 18% of those experiencing homelessness entered directly from prison or an extended jail stay,[45] compared to 10% of white Californians and 15% of those of other races. While 6% of Black Californians enter homelessness directly from prison, 4% of white and 8% of other races did. Twelve percent of Black Californians entered homelessness directly from jail compared to 6% of white and 7% of those from other races. The high proportion entering from carceral settings reflects how mass incarceration disproportionately affects Black Californians. Policies focused on interrupting the incarceration to homelessness

pipeline would measurably reduce homelessness and the disproportionate impact of homelessness on Black Californians. We address the repercussions of incarceration in more depth later in this chapter.

Over three quarters (79%) of Black Californians entered homelessness directly from housing. Nearly half (46%) entered from a situation for which they did not hold a lease–living with family or friends, or in other informal arrangements without the legal protections of a lease agreement. Of Californians experiencing homelessness, 52% of white and 50% from other racial groups entered homelessness from these arrangements. Without legal protections, people who are living with friends or family have little recourse when faced with homelessness. They require agile systems to prevent their homelessness.

One in three (33%) Black individuals experiencing homelessness were leaseholders in their last housing prior to homelessness. In their last housing, 31% of Black Californians experiencing homelessness were named on a rental agreement. Given legacies of legal discrimination in homeownership for Black people, few (2%) Black participants entered homelessness from a mortgage-holding arrangement; 5% of white Californians experiencing homelessness did so.

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HOUSEHOLD INCOME AND HOUSING COSTS PRIOR TO HOMELESSNESS

A primary driver of homelessness is the mismatch between housing costs and income. In California, the dramatic mismatch between the cost of housing and household incomes fuels the homelessness crisis.

Leaseholders

Among Black Californians who entered homelessness from leaseholding arrangements, the median monthly household income in the six months prior to homelessness was $1200. The median household income for leaseholding white Californians and those from other racial groups experiencing homelessness was $1300 and $1500, respectively. Median monthly housing costs in the six months prior to homelessness was $675 for Black Californians who were leaseholders. Black Californians who held leases spent more than half of their income on housing costs, which is considered a severe housing cost burden. Spending more than half of a household's low income on rent is unsustainable and increases vulnerability to losing housing, particularly in the event of an unexpected economic shock. This disconnect between housing costs and income fuels the homelessness crisis and explains the challenges leaseholders who lose that housing face in trying to reenter the housing market. Having an eviction is a major barrier to future rentals for all. Black Californians, who experience discrimination on the rental housing market, face additional burdens. Thus, these households faced an unsustainable rental burden and then, once they lost the lease, they had few opportunities to re-enter housing.

Non-Leaseholders

Black Californians who entered homelessness from a non-leaseholding arrangement had lower monthly household incomes and lower housing costs in the six months prior to homelessness than leaseholders; however, their rental burdens remained high. Their median monthly household income in the six months prior to homelessness was $960. Non-leaseholding white Californians and those from other racial groups experiencing homelessness reported a median household income of $1000 and $900, respectively. A large proportion (45%) of Black Californians didn't make any rent contributions while doubled up. Among those who contributed to housing costs in their last housing arrangement, the median monthly housing costs were $400. With no legal protections and without contributing to housing costs, these individuals were at high risk of homelessness.

REASONS FOR LEAVING LAST HOUSING

We asked participants to share the factors that contributed to losing their housing and entering homelessness. Typically, homelessness results from a confluence of factors; thus, we asked them to name all of the reasons they lost their housing. Then, we asked them to focus on the primary reason.

Economic Reasons for Leaving Last Housing

As we found in *Toward a New Understanding*, leaseholders reported different primary reasons for losing their housing than do those who are doubled up. Among Black Californians experiencing homelessness, 11% indicated that lost or reduced income was the primary reason for leaving their last housing. Among those who were leaseholders in their previous housing, a higher proportion (20%) reported this reason.

In the general population, Black Americans are overrepresented among hourly wage workers,[46] leaving them with minimal agency over their work schedules and more susceptible to fluctuations in income compared to salaried workers. In the setting of a severe housing cost burden, this fluctuation can be enough to tip people into homelessness. In in-depth interviews, Black participants discussed work and employment changes, such as hours being cut from their work schedules, as reasons for leaving their last housing.

Health-Related Reasons for Leaving Last Housing

Black participants discussed how health, both their own and that of others in their social network, increased the precarity of their last housing arrangement. Health problems can interfere with the ability to work, making it difficult to keep up with housing costs. The COVID-19 pandemic created additional risks for low-paid, front-line workers. As one Black participant shared: "That's kind of making it bad for me because I really can't do too much. They have me as disabled because of my back and my leg, so I really can't do all the things I used to do…I got hurt at work just before COVID. And when COVID came, it just messed up everything, so. That's how I became homeless."

Black participants discussed the insufficiency of the social safety net for navigating disability-related barriers to work. Income from social insurance programs was insufficient to afford rent. As one Black participant noted: "I was diagnosed schizoaffective a long time ago. And so I've worked many jobs. Because I have involuntary speech, too, it never really worked out. So, I was already on SSDI for–I've been on SSDI from my mid-20s."

❝ *And then, the disability. You know? Disability. After my parents died, I was on my own. So then I really started to suffer and see all the hardship you have to go through to get housing and with a disability.* **❞**

Some people reported that they lost housing when members of their social network (family and friends) experienced health challenges. Due to the complex effects of structural racism, Black Americans die earlier than white Americans. One of the many consequences of the disproportionate burden of ill health and premature mortality is the increased likelihood that Black individuals will experience decreased social support due to the premature death of someone in their social network. Some Black participants described how they had lost their housing when someone they lived with (or cared for)

became ill or died. In some cases, they couldn't afford rent without the other person's income. In other cases, their loved one died (or went to a nursing home), and the participant was not on the lease–and therefore could not stay. One participant shared: "I was living—at my mom's house before she passed away…so when she passed away… I couldn't afford the rent alone by myself."

Social Reasons for Leaving Last Housing

Almost a third of Black Californians who were non-leaseholders in their last housing reported that interpersonal reasons, such as not wanting to impose on others (17%) or conflict between residents (13%) was why they left their last housing. Through in-depth interviews, it was clear that underlying the interpersonal reasons was economic distress. Participants reported that due to economic precarity, they had been forced to double up and live in crowded, under-resourced environments, which created conditions that led to conflict. The COVID pandemic heightened the stress.

Black participants described how these arrangements created tension or conflict, resulting in the breakdown of the relationship and eventual homelessness. One participant described how the interaction between overcrowded housing and the realities of COVID led to his homelessness.

❝ *Yeah, I was staying with family…I was sleeping on the couch… And there's...five other people in the front house and...they all came down with COVID...And when I was sick, I went back to the house because then the people in the back house had got it… I was able to quarantine there because my aunt was in the hospital... they couldn't release her to the house because I was there with COVID, so I had to leave.* **❞**

For some, substance use created tension. In in-depth interviews, some participants noted how substance use precipitated conflict with those they were living with, leading to their homelessness. One participant shared: "Me and my sister, we were staying together. My addiction got in the way of my relationship with my sister, and so we couldn't live together. And so she just got tired and told me to leave." For some, the substance use of someone else in the household created conflict. One participant recounted how the substance use of his roommate precipitated his need to leave housing to maintain his own sobriety. "And so I lived there for about two months until she started. She wants to go do [drugs], I told her I'm not really that person I used to be no more so the fun with the drugs and sex and all ain't going down like that… So we argued about that for about a month and I just got tired of it."

Discrimination

For some Black participants, anti-Black discrimination disrupted their housing stability. In in-depth interviews, some Black participants discussed how discrimination caused them to leave their housing. They left housing either to maintain personal safety or due to unfair treatment by those with authority at their last housing, such as property owners or building staff.

> **"** *Yeah, one of the roommates was very racist. And he had been basically attacking me and messing with me. And they gave him permission to do it. Destroyed my property and all kinds of stuff. They just made it very, very hard for me to stay.* **"**

Discrimination could disrupt housing indirectly, by impacting employment and therefore income. Participants described encountering racial and religious discrimination in the workplace. One participant shared: "So, I had a job that provided housing, and they – I left that job after some cultural things. They were like, 'Oh, you can't have your hair. You can't have your jewelry. You can't pray in the middle of the cafeteria.'"

Criminal Legal System

Black Americans are significantly more likely than white Americans to have criminal legal system involvement. Incarceration and its myriad downstream effects increased their risk for homelessness. More than one in five (22%) Black Californians experiencing homelessness entered directly from an institutional setting, primarily from carceral settings. Twelve percent entered from long-term jail stays; 6% of white and 7% of those from other racial groups did. Six percent of Black Californians entered homelessness from prison; 4% of white and 8% of Californians of other races did. This finding understates the immediate impact of incarceration on homelessness.

While 6% of Black Californians entered homelessness directly from prison, an additional 3% who had entered homelessness from housing had been discharged from prison in the six months prior to homelessness. Many had been discharged to transitional housing after prison, but hadn't had enough time to find long-term stable housing. Thus, while they did enter homelessness from housing, their prison stay and limited time in housing put them on the pathway to homelessness. A higher proportion had been in jail in the six months prior to homelessness, which can disrupt opportunities. Black participants with carceral histories discussed their prior record as a barrier to employment opportunities. They shared how workforce discrimination against those with carceral records led to extended periods of unemployment.

> **"** *It's just – it's hard, and I try to expunge my record, you know, so – so I could get a, you know, went through all that [stuff] to do that, and then it still I can't get a job. I mean, I – I walk the line, you know, on egg shells or whatever for five years so I can get off probation so I can get my record expunged, you know, so I can get a job. It's been six years now, still ain't got a job.* **"**

Few who exited prison or jail reported receiving support prior to reentry. Among Black Californians who had been incarcerated in prison prior to homelessness, 22% received support signing up for government benefits, 21% received help connecting to healthcare services, and 16% received any support to find housing. Among Black Californians who had been incarcerated in jail for at least a month prior to homelessness, 24% received help with benefits, 25% received help obtaining healthcare services, and 22% received support finding housing. A lower proportion of white and those from other racial groups experiencing homelessness who exited jail reported receiving reentry support: 12% of white and 19% of those from other racial groups received help signing up for benefits; 14% of white and 12% of those from other racial groups were connected to healthcare services; and 13% of white and 14% of those from other racial groups received help finding housing. Regional variation may account for this finding. California's Black population is concentrated in a few geographic areas; whereas, white and Latino/x populations are more broadly distributed.[47] Since people will serve jail time in the county where they offended and jail reentry efforts are implemented at the county level, these differences may reflect regional differences in practices. We observed more uniformity across racial groups who exited prison; where people serve their prison sentence is less tied to the region they came from.

In in-depth interviews, Black participants discussed the dearth of adequate resources available to them when they exited carceral settings. As one participant noted: "No, they never had resources. They come like a month or two before you're getting released, but all it is just something to make them look good on paper. Like they let you out with $200, that's it. But at the end of the day, it's not enough."

Carceral records created a barrier to remaining housed. One participant described having sufficient funds to find alternate housing after realizing their current living situation was in jeopardy, but being turned away after a background check. "And when I had gotten $36,500, the first thing that me and my significant other tried to do was go get housing somewhere else, like another apartment or

something like that. And because of my criminal background, they were like, 'Oh, no, we can't rent to you.'" Despite having the financial resources to pay for housing, those with histories of incarceration faced an additional barrier to obtaining housing.

LIMITED SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO PREVENT HOMELESSNESS

Half (50%) of all Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported seeking help prior to homelessness; this number was higher than the 30% of white and 31% of those from other racial groups reported. However, Black Californians primarily sought help from friends or family (29%). Approximately one-third received any help (32%), but 25% were from friends or family. This help was not sufficient to prevent their homelessness.

Participants' friends and family faced similar challenges, which limited the support participants could receive from them. The paucity of intergenerational wealth, heightened risk of criminal legal system involvement, earlier onset of health problems, and ongoing anti-Black discrimination decreased Black Californians' social networks' ability to offer support.

> **" The housing program I was on canceled their contract with the apartments so they said they wouldn't pay for my voucher. [We were in that program] about four years. [My] mom signed me up for [her housing program and I went to live with her]... for close to a year ...[But] she lost her apartment. That was when I first got...outside. She wind up giving me one of her cars and bought another one, and me and my girlfriend started sleeping in it. "**

> **❝** *I used to stay with my brother. But he, he passed away. My brother, and my sister, they both passed away, but he was on like some kind of housing or what-ever. We took care of him… We were able to stay there because we were taking care of him… But they notified us like we had 90 days to get out the place… that's when the homelessness thing started again.* **❞**

Others described how strained familial relationships limited their ability to receive help. One participant shared: "I could have probably stayed with family, right? That's what you would want to run to and stay with family. But unfortunately it didn't work that way. My mom was like, 'No, I think it'd be best you guys stay at a shelter.' I'll never forget."

Only 11% of Black Californians experiencing home-lessness reported seeking help from a government agency. In in-depth interviews, those who sought help from government entities described encounter-ing a series of administrative hurdles that made it difficult to obtain help while simultaneously navi-gating the stress of imminent housing loss. As one participant shared: "I lost custody of my son. And it was a very stressful period. And I lost my voucher because I failed to go to an appointment [for] the housing. And I failed to respond because I was so stressed out. My son just moved into a foster home."

Despite the challenges that Black Californians expe-rienced prior to homelessness, they were optimistic that financial support could have prevented their homelessness. We asked participants to recall the period prior to homelessness and consider if each of three hypothetical financial interventions (a $300-$500 monthly subsidy; a one-time $5,000-$10,000 lump sum payment; or a housing voucher, similar to a Housing Choice Voucher, which limits house-hold contributions to rent to 30% of income) would have prevented their homelessness and stabilized them for at least two years. Among Black

Californians experiencing homelessness, 66% believed that a shallow monthly subsidy would have staved off homelessness for at least two years; 87% believed a lump-sum payment would have done so. Almost all (92%) believed a housing voucher that limited their rental contribution would have kept them housed for at least two years.

SUMMARY

Black Californians recalled how one hardship after another led to their experience of homelessness. Many of these hardships were related to the ongoing impacts of structural racism. The disproportionate burden of incarceration in Black Californians increased their risk for homelessness. High housing costs and low incomes left Black Califor-nians vulnerable to homelessness. Systemic, health, employment, interpersonal challenges, and anti-Black discrimination compounded economic precarity, leaving Black participants at increased risk of homelessness. Black participants sought help prior to homelessness more often, but did so from members of their social networks. Because their social networks also faced the ongoing impacts of structural anti-Black racism, they were not in a position to offer participants support sufficient to prevent homelessness.

Providing targeted interventions to prevent housing loss among those at risk of homelessness could meaningfully contribute to ending the crisis of homelessness in the Black community. To disrupt the disproportionate burden of homelessness on Black populations, decreasing the high rates of incarceration and the immediate and long-term impacts of incarceration on housing is paramount. Stopping the incarceration to homelessness pipeline would not only have a measurable effect on rates of homelessness but would also decrease the disproportionate impact of homelessness on Black Americans. Increasing Black people's economic position, while working to lower housing costs, will result in lower rates of homelessness. Addressing the disproportionate impact of homelessness on the Black community would benefit all.

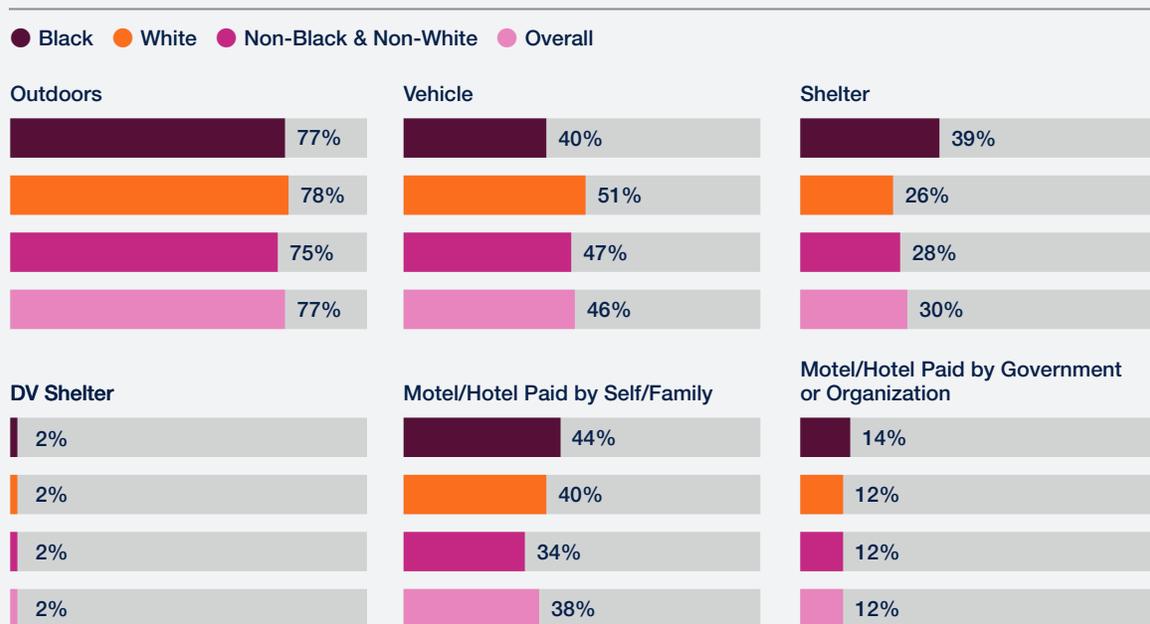# Black Californians' Experiences During Homelessness

In this section, we explore Black Californians' experiences during this episode of homelessness. We examine where they stayed, their physical and mental health, their experiences with substance use, and how they interacted with the healthcare system. We discuss Black Californians' experiences with the criminal legal system and their interactions with police, their experiences with forced displacements and confiscations, and their exposure to violence. To understand their financial situation, we asked about their income and whether it came from employment or receipt of public benefits. In both the survey and in-depth interviews, we discussed the types of discrimination that Black Californians face.

WHERE DID BLACK CALIFORNIANS STAY WHILE HOMELESS?

To assess where study participants stayed during their current episode of homelessness, we asked where they stayed at least one night and where they had stayed most often in the last six months. People stay in many different settings while they are homeless, including unsheltered locations (outdoors or in vehicles), in emergency shelters, with friends or relatives, in motels, and in short-term institutional settings (jails or hospitals).

Homelessness is not a static experience but rather one of constant movement, instability, and insecurity. Black Californians were more likely to report staying at least one night in emergency shelters (39%) than white (26%) or non-Black non-white (28%) respondents. They were similarly likely as white participants to stay in hotels or motels paid for by themselves or their friends and family (Black: 44%; white: 40%) but more likely than non-Black

FIGURE 10 Places Participants Slept at Least Once in the Past Six Months

● Black   ● White   ● Non-Black & Non-White   ● Overall

Outdoors
- Black: 77%
- White: 78%
- Non-Black & Non-White: 75%
- Overall: 77%

Vehicle
- Black: 40%
- White: 51%
- Non-Black & Non-White: 47%
- Overall: 46%

Shelter
- Black: 39%
- White: 26%
- Non-Black & Non-White: 28%
- Overall: 30%

DV Shelter
- Black: 2%
- White: 2%
- Non-Black & Non-White: 2%
- Overall: 2%

Motel/Hotel Paid by Self/Family
- Black: 44%
- White: 40%
- Non-Black & Non-White: 34%
- Overall: 38%

Motel/Hotel Paid by Government or Organization
- Black: 14%
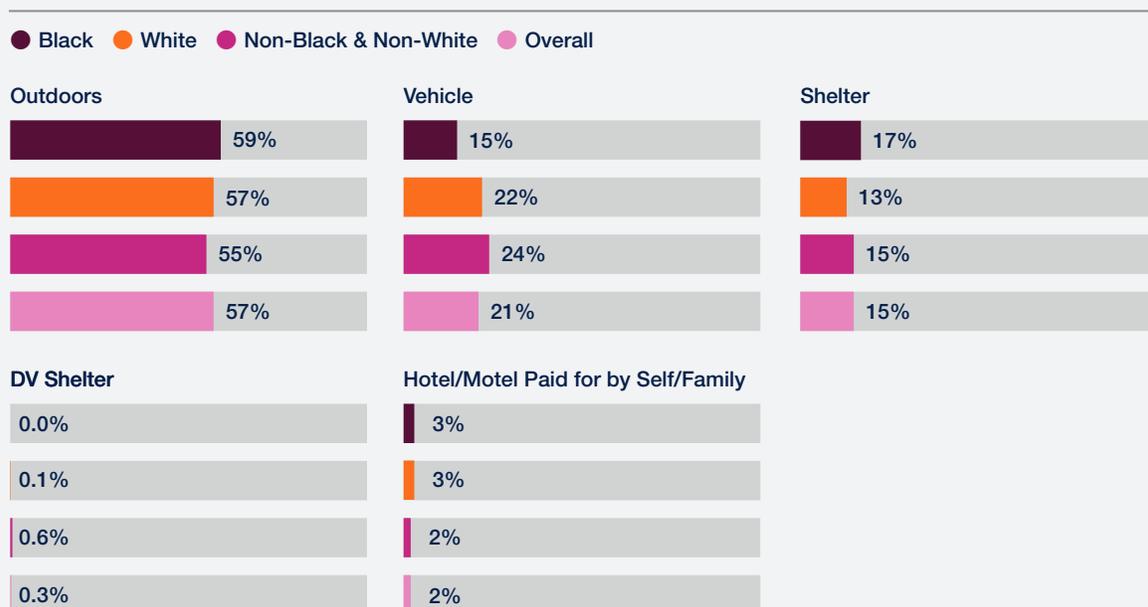- White: 12%
- Non-Black & Non-White: 12%
- Overall: 12%

non-white Californians to do so (34%). They were less likely to sleep in vehicles than white Californians. Over three-fourths (77%) of Black participants reported sleeping outdoors, and 40% reported sleeping in a vehicle at some point in the past six months.

When we asked Black participants where they slept most often over the past six months during their current episode of homelessness, we found that similar proportions reported spending most of their nights in shelter (17%) compared to homeless Californians who were white (13%) or other races (15%). Like both white and non-Black non-white Californians, over half spent most of their nights outdoors. Fifteen percent spent most of their nights in a vehicle. Like other Californians experiencing homelessness, many fewer spent most of their nights in a vehicle than had spent any nights doing so. In in-depth interviews, we heard of vehicles being ticketed and towed, leaving people without the vehicle which provided them both transportation and a measure of safety. Black Californians with vehicles noted that it was hard to find suitable places to park for an extended time without drawing attention from law enforcement.

> " *The [non-Black people], they go into an apartment…wherever they want to go. For the rest of us? We have to submit to some more paperwork…and I still haven't heard anything. This one guy…His skin was a little darker and I guess him and a [non-Black person] got into it or something. So dude, he start talking. Next day, they kicked him out. He had dark skin and so they booted him out.* "

In-depth interviews revealed that, after losing their last stable housing, Black participants moved often prior to staying either outdoors or in shelters. Many told us that they had stayed with relatives or friends for a couple of days, paid for hotels or motels for several more, then slept in their cars, and then returned to staying with friends or in motels. Many viewed going to an emergency shelter as a last resort because it meant entering the homeless services system—

FIGURE 11 Places Participants Slept Most Often in the Past Six Months

● Black ● White ● Non-Black & Non-White ● Overall

Outdoors

Black	59%
White	57%
Non-Black & Non-White	55%
Overall	57%

Vehicle

Black	15%
White	22%
Non-Black & Non-White	24%
Overall	21%

Shelter

Black	17%
White	13%
Non-Black & Non-White	15%
Overall	15%

DV Shelter

Black	0.0%
White	0.1%
Non-Black & Non-White	0.6%
Overall	0.3%

Hotel/Motel Paid for by Self/Family

Black	3%
White	3%
Non-Black & Non-White	2%
Overall	2%

a system where they anticipated experiencing anti-Black racism–and losing their privacy and autonomy. Shelter residents must abide by strict rules. In keeping with the experiences they had had throughout their lives, Black participants expressed that they would be expected to follow the rules more closely and would be judged more harshly for any mistakes than shelter residents of other races. Being subject to such surveillance added an extra level of stress to the already difficult experience of homelessness.

As noted in Chapter 1, the median length of Black Californians' episodes of homelessness was 17 months. Most emergency shelters have a 90-day maximum stay. One participant shared: "It's been a year [of] jumping from shelter to shelter to shelter. We only can stay 90 days. So, after 90 days, you go look for another shelter, and another shelter, and another shelter."

Despite the fears that Black participants had about emergency shelters, 42% of Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported that there was a time when they wanted shelter but could not access it during this episode of homelessness.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Black Californians experiencing homelessness were more likely to report at least one chronic medical condition[48] (67%) than those of other racial groups (compared to 58% for white and non-Black non-white). The two most common chronic medical conditions reported by Black Californians were asthma/chronic bronchitis/COPD (30%) and high blood pressure (41%).

Similar to the overall homeless population, 44% of Black Californians reported having fair or poor health (as opposed to good, very good, or excellent). We asked participants to report whether they had difficulty with activities of daily living (ADLs) such as dressing, bathing, eating, transferring [out of a bed or chair], and toileting. Thirty-eight percent of Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported difficulties with at least one ADL (compared to 32% of white and 33% of non-Black non-white Californians).

In-depth interview participants shared how the stress and conditions of being homeless had worsened their health.

FIGURE 12 Proportion of Participants Who Reported At Least One Chronic Medical Condition

● Black ● White ● Non-Black & Non-White ● Overall

- Black: 67%
- White: 58%
- Non-Black & Non-White: 58%
- Overall: 60%
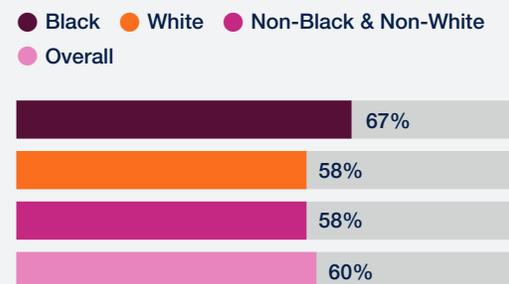
" *I've been out in the street for six years. I caught COVID. I had pneumonia. In January, I went in for some procedure. A month later I was back in the hospital for getting my feet cut off. My two feet are missing and two of my fingers. And then somebody said diabetes. So, now it's just about readjusting to life in a wheelchair. … People discriminate against me all the time for the fact that I've been in prison. I'm Black… Maybe I wouldn't have lost my feet if I hadn't come back to the streets. But I've got to get out of here… because this right here? It's conducive to failure.* "

USE OF HEALTHCARE SERVICES

We asked participants about their connection to healthcare services. Over half (54%) of Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported that they had a primary care provider; 66% reported that they were connected to a regular place for healthcare. Almost three fourths of Black Californians (73%) reported visiting a non-emergency department healthcare provider in the previous year. A larger proportion of Black Californians reported these visits than did white and non-Black non-white Californians. The higher proportions of Black Californians who had a regular place for healthcare and a primary care provider could be due to regional differences, but this finding deserves further exploration.
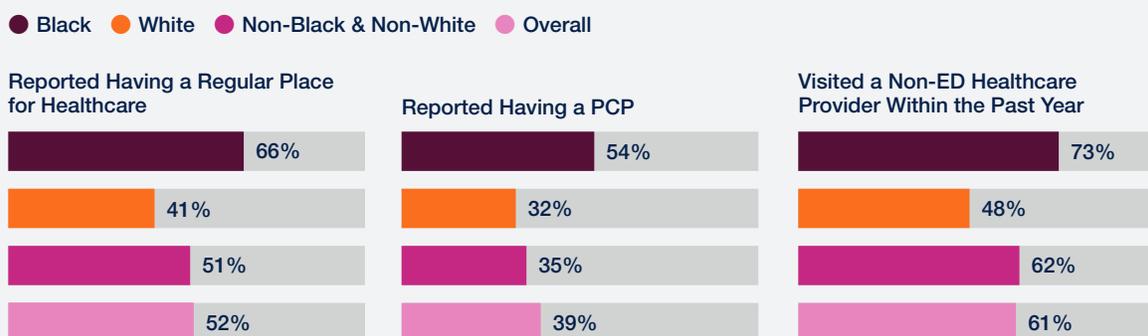
Despite relatively high percentages of Black Californians who were connected to primary care providers and a regular place for healthcare, 26% of Black individuals reported that they had had an unmet medical need, and 25% reported that they were unable to access medication prescribed to them in the prior six months.

In in-depth interviews, Black participants recounted experiencing discrimination in healthcare settings. They encountered healthcare providers who assumed they were "drug addicts" looking for opioids or had discounted serious symptoms. For example, one participant discussed her experience attempting to get care for a heart condition. "I've had problems with my heart and [doctors] always overlooked it. Problems with my heart that is connected to high blood pressure. And they just kept overlooking it."

> **"** *Sometimes I feel as though I have to beg for [the doctor] to take care of me. You know, all I'm looking for is my painkillers and they keep coming at me with this, 'You're going to overdose,' and I keep telling them, 'I'm not in it for the high.' I don't even know what the high feels [like]. I know what the pain feel like without it so I keep trying to tell them, 'I'll sign whatever you need me to sign,' White people walk out there with a f- [bag] full of [pills] and there's no problem for them, but I got to fight tooth and nail for some [thing] I really need.* **"**

Other Black participants shared their struggles to get to a clinic or pick up prescription medication due to lack of transportation. One participant shared: "My prescription is there but I don't have nobody to take me right now so I'll probably end up having to pay one of these people to take me and stuff. So I'm in limbo because the doctor, they haven't figured out a plan, so I can stop taking these pills. I don't want to be freaking having to take pills all the time, you know what I mean?"

FIGURE 13 Use of Non-Emergency Department Healthcare Services

● Black ● White ● Non-Black & Non-White ● Overall

Reported Having a Regular Place for Healthcare

Black	66%
White	41%
Non-Black & Non-White	51%
Overall	52%

Reported Having a PCP

Black	54%
White	32%
Non-Black & Non-White	35%
Overall	39%

Visited a Non-ED Healthcare Provider Within the Past Year

Black	73%
White	48%
Non-Black & Non-White	62%
Overall	61%

ACUTE HEALTHCARE UTILIZATION

In the past six months, 33% of Black Californians experiencing homelessness went to an emergency department but were not admitted. For comparison, in 2019, approximately 22% of Americans aged 18 and older had visited the ED at least once in the prior *year*.[49] Twenty-eight percent of Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported an inpatient hospitalization for a physical health reason compared to 16% among white Californians who were homeless.

The high proportion of Black Californians reporting emergency department visits and inpatient hospitalizations reflects several factors, including the overall poor health of those who are homeless, the deleterious impacts of homelessness on health, and the limited options to treat people who are ill as outpatients (lowered admission thresholds). Within the homeless population, Black Californians experiencing homelessness were more likely to have been hospitalized for a physical health concern than white Californians, despite white Californians being more likely to use illicit drugs regularly or have heavy alcohol use, and a similar proportion who were older than 50.

PREGNANCY

Pregnancy was common among Black Californians experiencing homelessness. Among Black Californians assigned female at birth aged 18-44, 29% reported being pregnant at some point during this episode of homelessness compared to 18% of white Californians. Pregnancy increases the risk of homelessness, especially among low-income Black Californians.[50] Homelessness decreases access to needed prenatal healthcare, making pregnancy harder and more risky. One participant described the struggle of living in her car alone while four months pregnant. She said, "It makes me real sad. I can cry right now. It depresses me. Like, it brings me to a very dark place because when am I going to ever get out of this, you know?"

MENTAL HEALTH

We asked participants about mental health symptoms experienced in the last 30 days during this episode of homelessness. Because people may have faced barriers to receiving medical care, we focused on symptoms, rather than diagnoses. We asked whether participants experienced symptoms of serious anxiety (uptightness, unreasonably worried, unable to relax) or serious depression (sadness, hopelessness, loss of interest, difficulty with daily functioning). We asked if they had had difficulty concentrating or remembering things or ever experienced hallucinations (saw or heard things that weren't there). Similar to all Californians experiencing homelessness, a high proportion of Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported current mental health symptoms. Similar proportions of Black Californians reported symptoms of depression (51%), anxiety (51%), and trouble remembering (38%) as other adults experiencing homelessness, but Black Californians were more likely to report experiencing hallucinations in the past 30 days (18%) than white (8%) or non-Black non-white Californians (11%).

Experiencing homelessness is stressful and can worsen mental health through many mechanisms, including ongoing trauma, hopelessness, lack of sleep, and inability to get treatment. As one Black participant shared: "It's just like, of course, you're going through something. You're homeless. Like you're sleeping outside. So, stress – anything – anxiety." Not knowing how long one might be without

> **"** *I cry because I've been so discouraged that I don't think I'm worth living. I just go to the bridge because that's the way that I will kill myself. Free housing creates a huge opportunity to work towards your image and your personal development. You don't have to have three jobs to pay rent. You don't have to have your fear, and your worries. That's the basic foundation to just make you a man, and give you time to land a good job that's going to provide good housing.* **"**

housing is also stressful. As another Black participant shared: "[Being homeless] has impacted [my mental health] because I feel like I'm not getting the help I need from my advocate to help me with that, even though she tells me, 'Oh, yeah, you're on the waiting list.' But you're only giving me a year to live here. What happens when my year comes up and I still don't have anything? Are they going to kick me and my kids out on the street?" Being homeless can also exacerbate existing mental health symptoms. Another Black participant shared how being homeless made his mental health challenges worse. Despite having access to therapy, the lack of stable housing caused everything else to fall apart.

We asked whether participants had access to outpatient mental health counseling or medication in the past 30 days. Among those who reported at least one mental health symptom during this episode, 35% of Black Californians did. In addition, we asked whether they had experienced a mental health hospitalization in the prior six months; 5% of Black Californians had.

SUBSTANCE USE

We asked participants about current regular use of illicit drugs (amphetamines, cocaine, non-prescription opioids) and alcohol. We defined regular use as 3 times a week or more. Lower proportions of Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported current regular illicit drug use (28%) than white (42%) and non-Black non-white Californians (34%). Fifty six percent of Black Californians reported that they used no substances in the past six months.

We defined unhealthy alcohol use as consuming six or more drinks in a single sitting weekly or more often. Ten percent of Black Californians reported heavy episodic alcohol use at least weekly.

Thirty four percent of Black Californians reported current regular illicit drug use three times a week or more or heavy episodic alcohol use at least weekly compared to white (45%) and non-Black non-white (41%) Californians.
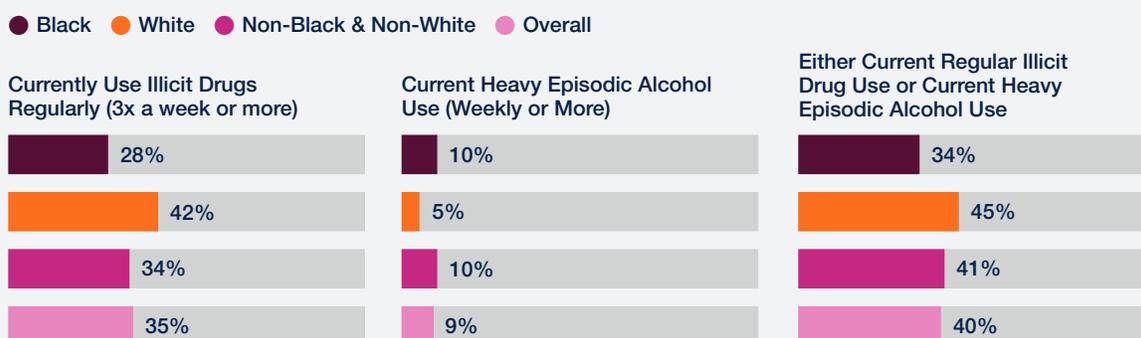
Substance use changes over time. We sought to understand how homelessness affects the frequency of substance use. For Black Californians who reported illicit drug use at some point in their lives, 33% reported that their substance use increased a little (9%) or a lot (24%) during this episode of homelessness. Thirty-seven percent of Black Californians noted no change in their drug use during this episode, similar to other racial groups.

Of Black Californians who reported regular illicit substance use or heavy episodic alcohol use, 19% reported that they wanted treatment for substance use or alcohol consumption but were unable to access it during this episode of homelessness; 27% of white and 29% of non-Black non-white Californians experiencing homelessness did. This difference could result from a lower proportion who want treatment or fewer barriers for those who do.

TOBACCO USE

We asked participants about their cigarette smoking. Of Black Californians, 73% smoked cigarettes during this episode of homelessness; 56% did so daily.

FIGURE 14 Self-Reported Regular Illicit Drug Use and Weekly Heavy Episodic Alcohol Use

● Black ● White ● Non-Black & Non-White ● Overall

Currently Use Illicit Drugs Regularly (3x a week or more)

Black	28%
White	42%
Non-Black & Non-White	34%
Overall	35%

Current Heavy Episodic Alcohol Use (Weekly or More)

Black	10%
White	5%
Non-Black & Non-White	10%
Overall	9%

Either Current Regular Illicit Drug Use or Current Heavy Episodic Alcohol Use

Black	34%
White	45%
Non-Black & Non-White	41%
Overall	40%

CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT AND INTERACTIONS WITH POLICE

Over one fourth of Black participants (28%) spent time in jail during this episode of homelessness, similar to both white and non-Black non-white participants. Many more shared stories of unfavorable interactions with police officers—including being unfairly targeted for being homeless. Many jurisdictions across California have passed laws criminalizing loitering or sleeping in public places. While recent court cases limit the scope of these laws, in practice, people experiencing homelessness are subject to policing for activities that would not be criminal (or enforced) if the behaviors took place in private. One Black participant shared what this meant for him. "You get a ticket for being here. Now, you've got to go to court. 'Damn, I've got no bus pass. How am I going to get to court?' Oh, well, you didn't get to court. Oh, you can't afford $40.00 [for the ticket]? You're under arrest. That's the system."

In some communities, police came to encampments to do warrant checks on anyone in the area, sometimes undercover, and arrested people whether or not they were engaged in any illicit behavior. One Black participant reported that a friend was dealing drugs. Undercover police officers came into the encampment and observed the friend's behavior. When they revealed themselves as police, the friend ran away and the police officers arrested the participant—who was not engaged in any illicit behavior—instead. He told us, "The police just did what they did, they lied. Took me to jail for 18 months."

For Black Californians experiencing homelessness on parole (3%) or probation (8%), life was even harder. The probation and parole system requires people to check in frequently with probation and parole officers. Many Black Californians experiencing homelessness did not have access to transportation to make it to these check-ins. We heard from participants that police officers frequently came through encampments looking for people on parole or probation in order to rearrest them. One participant described this experience as a constant feeling of having a target on his back.

> **"** *[My] probation officers would violate me for being homeless or not being able to come down there and check in when I don't have transportation. One of my POs actually came out to where I was homeless to check and see if I was really homeless. [They don't offer you help]. All they do is try to test you and try to find a reason to put you back in jail. That 12 years I was on paperwork was like the worst 12 years of my life. I felt like I couldn't even jaywalk without going to jail.* **"**

One major way that anti-Black racism shows up in everyday life for Black people is through interactions with police officers. Police officers are more likely to assume that Black people look suspicious and target them for questioning than non-Black people. They arrest Black people more often for minor misdemeanors and punish them more harshly in courts.[51,52] Black participants shared that police officers were constantly harassing them, even if it didn't lead to a ticket or an arrest. This harassment took the form of being stopped and questioned just for being Black in public places, whether outdoors or in vehicles. While police interactions and arrests were high for all people experiencing homelessness, Black participants' experiences resonated with their experiences throughout their lives.

FORCED DISPLACEMENTS AND CONFISCATIONS

Like other homeless Californians, Black Californians spoke about the effect of forced displacements on their lives. Forced displacements, or sweeps, occur when officials (e.g., police officers, sanitation workers) resolve a homeless encampment by confiscating or disposing of all belongings that individuals living in the encampment do not, or cannot, remove themselves. Individuals are then requested or required to physically relocate from the area. Some-

times individuals targeted for sweeps are given re-ferrals to services or access to temporary shelter beds, but often no services are provided. Some participants spoke of waking up to flyers posted around their en-campment with announcements about a scheduled sweep. Others spoke of police officers showing up and warning them over a bullhorn that enforcement was coming, and they had to evacuate. For some, case workers promised them housing, but they were forced to leave the encampment without receiving a placement for somewhere else. Still, others shared that they received little to no advanced warning and had little time to collect their belongings. Participants echoed that when forced displacements happened, officials were often violent and verbally abusive in the process.

> **❝ [I've stayed] all over. All over because the cops would come and kick us out of every place. So, we had to move like every couple of weeks, it seems like, and move all our stuff. Yeah, go from here to there, there to here. Oh, my God. I spend more time moving around than I do getting anything done. ❞**

Black participants shared how forced displacements caused long-term damage that kept them unhoused for longer. In the process of sweeps, officials typically throw away the things that people aren't able to move. Black participants shared stories of losing their IDs, passports, important documents, life savings, as well as family photos and gear needed to keep warm at night. One Black participant shared: "The people that come out here and force us to move? They give us like probably 20 minutes, and then if we don't have our [stuff] packed up and ready to go, they start bulldozing it and throwing it away. [This happened] just a week ago. They threw away probably half our [stuff]."

> **❝ I lost everything, everything, everything. I mean, [the rangers] came and raided our tent. Took every f-dollar that we had in that f-ing tent out. I saved my money like we planned to. Within nine months, I went from having it all, which was nothing, to literally having nothing and just daily survival. ❞**

EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

In the first chapter, we discussed Black Californians lifetime exposure to violence. In this section, we explore Black Californians exposure to physical and sexual violence during their current episode of homelessness. While past experiences of violence increase the risk of homelessness, homelessness increases the risk of violence. Thirty-three percent of Black Californians reported experiencing physical or sexual violence during this episode of home-lessness: 32% reported physical violence and 11% reported sexual violence.

We asked participants to report their relationship to the perpetrator. For those who reported that they had experienced physical violence, 41% reported that the violence was committed by a stranger and 26% by an intimate partner. For those who reported that they had experienced sexual violence, 51% reported that the violence was committed by a stranger and 30% by an intimate partner.[53]

INCOME

Black Californians reported low total household incomes (including income from work [formal and informal] and income benefits). In the previous 30 days while homeless, the median household income (all those with whom they currently shared income and expenses) was $705. This finding is higher than the median monthly income for white ($400) and non-Black non-white ($300) Californians experienc-ing homelessness. Ten percent of Black Californians experiencing homelessness reported no income in the previous 30 days. The median monthly house-hold income for those who reported any income was

$800. While higher than members of other racial groups experiencing homelessness, a median income of $800 is not enough to afford housing, particularly when contending with multiple forms of discrimination on the housing market.

WORK AND EMPLOYMENT

Black Californians described their relationship to work and employment during homelessness. Eight percent of Black Californians reported that they had worked at least 20 hours for pay within the last 30 days (10% of those younger than 62 without a disability).

We asked participants about all sources of income in the past 30 days. In the month prior, 17% reported income from a job; 35% of Black Californians reported income from recycling or another odd job. Eighty percent received income from benefits and 1% from a pension. Twelve percent received money from panhandling. Some reported income from illegal sources (selling drugs [7%] or sex [1%]). One fourth (25%) of Black Californians received financial assistance from friends, family, or acquaintances outside of their personal household.

Black Californians reported lengthy disconnects from the labor market. Of those younger than 62 without a physical or mental disability, 66% reported that it had been at least two years since they had worked 20 hours or more weekly. Still, Black Californians wanted to find work: 46% of all Black Californians reported they were currently looking for employment (46% among those younger than 62 without a disability).

Income from jobs in the gig economy and recycling was inconsistent and unpredictable. Participants wanted employment in the mainstream economy, but faced barriers to obtaining these jobs. As one participant explained: "[I've tried] bike shop jobs. Construction jobs. Anything, really. I mean fast food, whatever, anything. I'd rather have an 8-hour pay, knowing what I'm going to get paid in 8 hours than recycle because at least I'd know what I'm going to get, you know what I mean? Recycling fluctuates so much. You never know. I can get $20 one day or $60 one day. It all depends."

" As soon as I can find a job, I just take it. I don't even care about what minimum wage is. I think it might be about 14 bucks. About $14.25, or $14.75. I don't even care. As long as I've got a job. I'm fine. I don't care. You can pay me under the minimum wage. I'll still take the job because I just don't want to be without money, or without food, or without stuff that we need… to survive. "

During in-depth interviews, Black participants described several barriers to employment. For some, it was not having the documentation needed to secure a job. One participant shared: "It's kind of hard because I don't have an ID or anything right now so if somebody does say, okay, we'll work with you, I don't have an ID or social security card so I have to wait." There are many reasons why people experiencing homelessness lack necessary papers such as IDs and social security cards. As noted above, during forced displacements, personal property (including documents) is often discarded. Participants shared how hard it was to keep any personal property safe and undamaged without a home.

Even those who worked in the formal economy had insufficient income to provide for their basic needs and exit homelessness. One Black retail worker shared: "Yeah, I stress out a lot. I do. I'm, basically, like, every day, like, how am I going to make money? Well, right now, I have a job currently so, everything's going good hopefully, but my main stress is like sometimes if I have money, how am I going to get food, you know?" This concern was also true for participants who acquired money through government-funded programs including General Relief and Social Security.

DISCRIMINATION

Seventy eight percent of Black Californians reported experiencing discrimination in their daily lives. In interviews, Black participants discussed the types of discrimination that they experienced while homeless. Black participants shared stories that illustrated how structural, institutional, and interpersonal racism resulted in their needing to work "ten times harder" for the same resources than those of other racial groups.[54] One participant shared: "I'm the underdog. I accept that. And I know I have to jump hurdles and get through things in life by doing ten–I have to go further. I have to take ten steps further than them all the time. Because even if I'm right there with them, I'm still not viewed equally. So, I got to be ten steps ahead of them in order to succeed, to get up out of this. And I know that."

Additionally, participants' intersectional identities led to complex and overlapping experiences of discrimination. We asked participants how their being Black impacted the discrimination they experienced about being homeless, and vice versa. "It's no different than when I'm not homeless, other than the fact that being homeless and Black is worse than just being homeless," she shared. "But it's not any discrimination that I haven't dealt with every day. You know, just, if I go into a restaurant Black, they might look at me like I'm not going to pay, but they won't make me pay for my food before they give it to me. Being homeless, they make you pay for your food before they serve it, which is like, embarrassing. When you're the only people in there that's paying for your food before they bring."

From in-depth interviews, we learned that covert, subtle, and underlying racism pervaded Black Californians daily life, often in the form of different treatment and opportunities than those of other racial groups. Black Californians shared experiences of being subject to the red tape, excessive rules, and opaque processes of the homeless services system while watching people of other races not be subject to the same processes. Research highlights how institutional racism shapes service delivery. For example, research has shown racial bias in the Vulnerability Index, Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT)–a triage tool used to identify the service provision for people experiencing homelessness.[55] Black people–and Black women in particular–receive lower scores for comparable life experiences compared to other racial groups, deprioritizing them for critical services and housing.

"It's a couple other [Black] people when we first came here about a year ago. All three of us are still here. Other people that came after us, they got housing already and it's like, well, I'm disabled, and I can't get any housing yet and I don't feel good about that. I've asked my counselor and all he can do is say, 'Hey, you have to wait till they get to your name.' I'm like, well, how is that? We still here and other people came and moved on. Something not right. All the people gone, they're all other nationalities but we're still here."

Black Californians experienced different treatment than those of other racial groups in finding services and jobs during homelessness. As one participant shared: "Everybody's always got these spots you go to. 'Oh, you can get this. Oh, you can get that.' Now, you go to these spots. Trust me, I qualify more than anybody just with my background [and] everything I have been going through. For some reason I always get told no to the point where I'm like, you know what? What's the sense of me doing that?"

Black Californians experienced anti-Black discrimination while searching for work and in the workplace. One participant described his friends' and his failed strategy to enter into the oil refinery business. During the interview, he described how hard it had been for him to find consistent work as a Black man with little schooling. He reflected: "I wish that I would have had more schooling and more training. I'm 58 years old and it's hard to be productive in the workforce when you don't have much schooling or background." However, several years ago, the oil refinery business was booming so his friends and he strategized about obtaining work in the well-paying industry. He shared: "Everybody was interested in working at these oil refinery jobs because we thought it was something we could do as Black and Hispanic men in the ghetto." The company started a vocational training program for people to earn the necessary certifications for the jobs. "I had this waste management and closed space certification. Once we got through this program, you get maybe six certifications." But when his friends and he graduated from the program, there were no jobs for them. He noted that the employer discriminated against

non-white applicants. He said: "It was just a whole big letdown. you weren't getting hired. Somebody else of another race, the whites coming in, they immediately get more. They don't get as looked at as thoroughly as they look at you. Simply because of race. Because discrimination. It's because of the color of your skin or because you're poor."

SUMMARY

This chapter explored Black Californians' experiences during their current episode of homelessness. Covert, subtle, and underlying racism pervaded Black Californians' daily lives, often in the form of different treatment and opportunities than those of other racial groups. This affected where Black Californians felt comfortable sleeping at night, their ability to obtain needed services, job opportunities, treatment by medical professionals, and law enforcement. These experiences increased the chance that Black Californians became homeless and then shaped their experiences of homelessness.

The stress of homelessness worsened Black Californians health status. While many had access to healthcare, they experienced anti-Black discrimination when they did receive care. Black Californians experiencing homelessness were less likely to report regular use of illicit substances or heavy alcohol use than did members of other racial groups experiencing homelessness. They were more likely to report severe mental health conditions, including hallucinations. Almost a third of Black women capable of pregnancy experienced a pregnancy during this episode of homelessness—a higher proportion than other racial groups. These ruptures added to the myriad traumas that Black people experienced while homeless. The experience of homelessness was marked by trauma: high rates of violence, high likelihood of arrests and jail stays, and high incidence of forced displacements.

Despite lengthy disconnects from the labor market, Black Californians wanted to find work but faced several barriers to doing so including discrimination on the job market, lack of documents such as IDs, lack of qualifications, and a criminal record. Structural, institutional, and interpersonal racism resulted in their needing to work ten times harder for the same resources than those of other racial groups.

The experience of homelessness was harrowing in every way. The same forces that increased Black Californians' chance of homelessness decreased their ability to escape it.

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Barriers and Facilitators of Returns to Permanent Housing

Black Californians experiencing homelessness faced numerous barriers to exiting homelessness. In this chapter, we review what impeded their return to housing, what support they received to help find housing, and what would facilitate their exit from homelessness.

HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

Housing costs were a barrier to permanent housing for 82% of Black Californians experiencing homelessness. Black Californians had extremely low household incomes in the months prior to homelessness, and their incomes decreased while homeless. An even higher proportion of white Californians (91%) noted that the cost of housing was a major barrier. The lower (if still high) proportion of Black Californians reporting the cost of housing as a major impediment likely reflects the myriad other structural (e.g., racial discrimination, carceral records) impediments to housing that Black Californians contend with.

More than half of Black Californians (59%) noted that the housing they could afford was too far away or unsafe. In in-depth interviews, Black participants shared that housing options that they could afford were in neighborhoods they felt were detrimental to their health and safety. As one Black participant noted: "Everything I can get, if you look at the list that they gave for Section 8 recipients is in areas that's bad for my health. It's going to put me back into where you will have to carry a weapon or something to protect you and your family because that's just—it's a dog-eat-dog world over there."

Black participants with housing vouchers that they were unable to use discussed the reasons for their limited options. Due to a mismatch between housing voucher payment standards and market rate rent, these participants couldn't find places to accept the vouchers, or if they did, would be relegated to housing options in disinvested neighborhoods. One participant shared: "Yeah. And even though they do have some things like, say, Section 8 and stuff like that, we're so priced out it's like Section 8 is $1,000 below the average median of even a studio in a livable area."
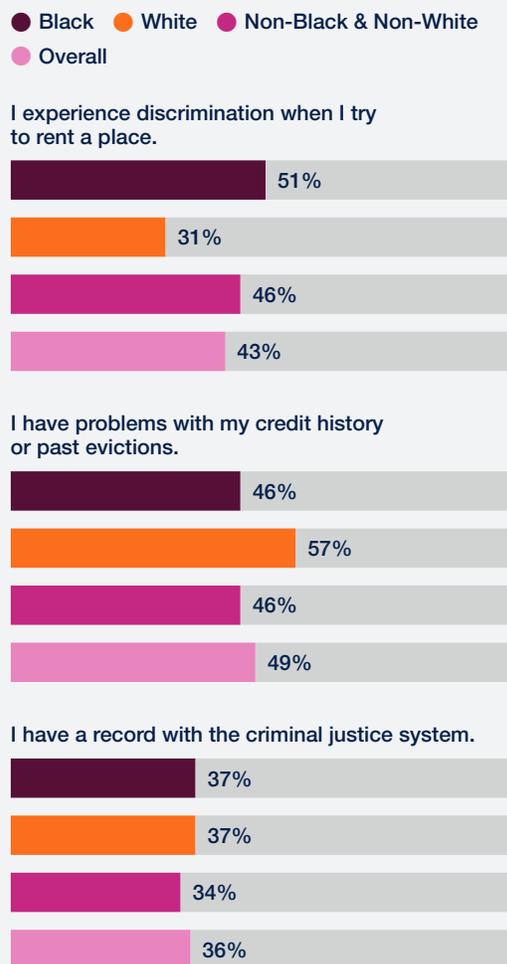
In in-depth interviews, some discussed how the lack of transportation options would leave them separated from their social networks and employment in areas in which they could afford housing, limiting its viability as an option.

WAIT TIMES AND ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS

Lengthy waitlists delayed exits from homelessness. Fifty-nine percent of Black Californians noted that these long waitlists were a barrier keeping them homeless; 48% of white and 49% of those from other racial groups did. In in-depth interviews, participants described years-long or closed waitlists for rental assistance and affordable housing. Despite a desire for housing, a shortage of affordable housing across California hindered their exit from homelessness. One participant shared: "...I got money put away to move in somewhere. But it's got to be affordable… And we went there. And they said it takes anywhere from one year to two years."

" Because, when they applied for me for Section 8, …I didn't get it…I'm not even on the waiting list for it. So I don't know. Yeah. My only concern, at the moment, when it's time to go out of here, where I'm going to go. Because rents are really crazy. Right now, I'm start looking for places. And, every time I look at rents, it's really big. I mean like I'm not making all this money to pay just for rent. And what about [other things]. You know? "

FIGURE 9 Discrimination and Prior History as Barriers to Permanent Housing by Race

● Black   ● White   ● Non-Black & Non-White
● Overall

I experience discrimination when I try to rent a place.

Black	51%
White	31%
Non-Black & Non-White	46%
Overall	43%

I have problems with my credit history or past evictions.

Black	46%
White	57%
Non-Black & Non-White	46%
Overall	49%

I have a record with the criminal justice system.

Black	37%
White	37%
Non-Black & Non-White	34%
Overall	36%

In in-depth interviews, Black participants noted how some housing resources were unavailable due to restrictive eligibility criteria. Some participants discussed strict income cut-offs making them ineligible for assistance, despite having limited financial resources while experiencing homelessness. One participant shared: "I'm still on the waiting list. And then, I was referred to the best project voucher for one of the housing [sites]. And, unfortunately, I wasn't eligible for it. They said I'm making too much money."

DISCRIMINATION AND PRIOR HISTORY

Black Californians experiencing homelessness described discrimination as a barrier more often than white Californians experiencing homelessness. Fifty one percent of Black Californians noted that they had experienced discrimination when trying to rent housing, compared to 31% of white Californians. Black participants encountered subtle, yet pervasive racial discrimination in their search for housing. They described being turned down for available housing units once the property owner or rental manager observed their racial identity. One Black participant shared: "[Obtaining housing through social media] is hard…cause you gotta show your face. I would get a lot of 'no's' or like, 'we're busy' or like 'we're not renting it yet,' even though it says 'renting out now.' So, yeah. They didn't respond to me after I showed them a picture—after they asked for a picture of me, they didn't respond."

Black participants discussed ways in which their being homeless compounded the racial discrimination they faced in the housing market. In in-depth interviews, participants discussed how anti-Black racism and discrimination due to their perceived homelessness made it more difficult to obtain housing.

❝ It just seems like he's running into the same things I'm running into where no one's getting back to us or they are like, 'Oh, well, no, we already rented it to somebody else,' things like that. We're getting the runaround, and we've been getting the runaround. ❞

More than a third (37%) of Black Californians indicated that their criminal justice record was a barrier to housing. Black Californians with prior criminal justice system involvement described the lingering impacts of their record on employment opportunities, economic mobility, and their access to housing. One participant shared: "As a juvenile, I experienced being incarcerated. As an adult, I experienced being incarcerated. Since my experience with being incarcerated as an adult, I have went back to school.

I got a business degree in business management. I have been actively trying to work to be a productive member of society. It's kind of hard with me having a criminal background, being an African American male, and being priced out of the housing market."

Eviction and credit history precluded access to housing. Nearly half (46%) of Black Californians noted credit history or past evictions as a barrier to obtaining housing; 57% of white and 46% of those from other racial groups experiencing homelessness indicated this.

> ❝ *If I'm going to go into what I consider to be a decent neighborhood...Sometimes the person will come out to show you the place or something and they've already got me figured out. They've got me pegged. I'm Black. They say, 'What type of work do you do?' Well, I was homeless. Whatever. I'm heavily scrutinized like that. But I don't tell them no more than they need to know, but somehow or another, it's like we got homeless on our foreheads or something, invisible.* ❞

SUPPORT FINDING HOUSING

Nearly two thirds (63%) of Black Californians noted insufficient help as a barrier to exiting homelessness. More than half (57%) received help finding housing from a case manager, housing navigator, or organization at any time during the current episode of homelessness; 45% of white and 41% of those from other racial groups experiencing homelessness did. Of Black Californians who reported help during the current episode, 62% reported receiving that help monthly or more frequently; 51% of white and 54% of those from other races experiencing homelessness

reported help at this frequency. Overall, 35% of Black Californians experiencing homelessness received help finding housing monthly or more frequently during the current episode of homelessness; this is higher than the proportion of white (23%) and those from other racial groups (22%) who did.

While a higher proportion of Black individuals experiencing homelessness reported receiving help at least once, that help did not yield permanent housing. Some discussed efforts to obtain help finding housing, but unequal treatment when seeking those resources. Others noted positive experiences with housing navigators or similar supports, but were unsuccessful in identifying housing. They expressed awareness of resource constraints and other challenges navigators encountered while providing assistance. One participant noted: "Yeah, I have been looking and looking and looking for places to live… And I have help from the school…He's a housing navigator. Literally, he has been busting his chops since about March as well just trying to help us find a place."

> ❝ *Yeah, a little bit here and there as much as I could. I reached out to my Section 8 case-worker. I reached out to my… which is the Welfare to Work program. They helped out with a hotel for us for a little while, but then obviously they ran out of funds. They run out of funds really fast, and then you don't have much to do after that. You can't do much. So, then it's just been looking for places here and there, looking for any other resources.* ❞

In in-depth interviews, some Black participants described the variability of help they had received. While some described positive experiences with housing navigators or others designated to provide support, others found less success accessing resources. One participant shared: "You call [referral line] to get the information. But they literally don't know of any services other than what they receive from the county. You would be lucky if you come across somebody who has more resources and then you can go ahead and get in touch with those resources, but then again you'll be lucky if they even answer you."

HYPOTHETICAL INTERVENTIONS TO SUPPORT RETURNS TO PERMANENT HOUSING

Similar to the homelessness prevention thought experiment detailed in chapter 2, we asked participants to consider if any of four hypothetical interventions would support their return to housing: a $300-$500 monthly shallow subsidy; a $5,000-$10,000 lump-sum payment; a housing voucher which limits one's personal contribution to rent to 30% of their income; or housing navigation. Participants responded to each intervention independently. Black Californians experiencing homelessness were optimistic that each intervention could help end their homelessness. Eighty-five percent thought a shallow monthly subsidy would help them return to housing, 96% thought a lump sum payment would, 97% thought a housing voucher would, and 96% thought housing navigation would. Black Californians experiencing homelessness were more likely to note that housing navigation would support their return to housing "a lot" (86% versus 74% of white Californians experiencing homelessness). While participants described difficulty obtaining permanent housing even with the support of a housing navigator, many saw housing navigators as helpful, particularly in a rental market in which they faced anti-Black discrimination when seeking housing alone.

While nearly all (96%) thought housing navigation would help, such support would need to be coupled with a financial intervention given the high proportion of Black Californians who indicated housing costs as a barrier to permanent housing.

SUMMARY

Black participants faced an array of barriers in their efforts to return to housing. Black Californians navigated many impediments to exiting homelessness, including high housing costs, discrimination, lengthy waitlists, and criminal justice system records. The compounding effects of anti-Black discrimination and discrimination against people who were homeless complicated an already difficult path toward housing returns. The extraordinary costs of housing limited their options. Other barriers, including the lack of transportation and social support in neighborhoods where they could afford housing lessened these options. They recognized the need for help in navigating the difficult challenges of returning to housing, but lacked sufficient help. Ultimately, the lack of affordable, permanent housing options and unequal treatment when receiving help hindered their return to housing. Ending homelessness among Black Californians will require both a dramatic increase in affordable housing, economic support to help people afford this housing, dedicated efforts to navigate a challenging housing market, and increased efforts to enforce anti-discrimination laws. Black Californians experiencing homelessness, like other Californians experiencing homelessness, yearned for a permanent home. To solve homelessness, we must recognize and reduce the many factors that impede the search for housing.

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Policy Recommendations

In this section, we present policy recommendations based on our findings. To support Black Americans at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness, we offer recommendations in six categories: address the economic marginalization of Black Americans, increase access to affordable housing options, strengthen homelessness prevention efforts, address the criminal justice system to homelessness cycle, support equitable health outcomes, and ensure the homeless response system centers equity.

Homelessness disproportionately impacts people who are Black. Most of our recommendations would serve to prevent or end homelessness for all. Some recommendations are specific for those impacted by anti-Black racism. Fair Housing laws at state and federal levels, and other legal considerations, preclude the ability to direct certain efforts to specific communities based on racial identities. Given the disproportionate representation of Black Americans in homeless populations, advancing recommendations that reduce homelessness in general could result in a measurable decrease in homelessness for Black people experiencing homelessness, as well as for all. Lifting Black people will lift all.[56]

ADDRESS ECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION OF BLACK AMERICANS

Centuries of legally sanctioned racism and discrimination have excluded Black Americans from economic opportunity. Racial income and wealth gaps persist across the United States. Economic precarity undergirds homelessness, increasing risk of experiencing homelessness and presenting a barrier to obtaining housing for those experiencing homelessness. To decrease the overrepresentation of Black Americans in homeless populations, addressing the economic exclusion of Black people is crucial.

⬗ **Provide direct cash assistance through reparations and guaranteed income.** Black Californians experiencing homelessness were optimistic that modest financial support could have helped stave off their homelessness. Likewise, they were optimistic that such support could promote their return to housing. Direct cash assistance, such as reparations and guaranteed income, for extremely low income Black Californians could help prevent and end homelessness. When not feasible to focus explicitly on the Black community, targeting guaranteed income programs to those who either live in or lost housing from census tracts that have faced disinvestment and/or segregation due to redlining is a way to ensure that these resources get to those at highest risk of homelessness.

REPARATIONS

The term "reparations" encompasses efforts to redress injustice–these efforts can include compensation. Some places designed programs to address reparations by accounting for the intersection of anti-Black racism and dispossession from the housing market. Evanston, Illinois was the first US city to pilot a reparations plan. Evanston's Restorative Housing Program aimed to redress harms created by a racially exclusionary housing market. The program provided funds in the form of a housing grant to select Black residents. Other reparation models provide unrestricted funds to Black people.

California launched the first statewide Reparations Task Force in 2020. In 2023, the Task Force issued a report with a set of policy recommendations and estimates of the cost of monetary reparations for California. The Task Force accounted for housing discrimination and unjust property seizures (disproportionately affecting Black communities in California) in their compensatory reparation estimations.

GUARANTEED INCOME

Guaranteed income programs provide cash assistance to eligible individuals. Typically, guaranteed income is unconditional. Unlike food or rental support, guaranteed income can be used for any purpose. It is intended to help individuals with limited financial resources meet basic needs. Guaranteed income demonstrations have been piloted in communities across the US, including pilots designed for people experiencing homelessness. Some have proposed guaranteed income models that account for the cumulative disadvantage that Black Americans face over the life course, calling for an additional supplement to basic income allowance for Black Americans.

◣ **Strengthen and enforce anti-discrimination policies in workplaces.** Challenges obtaining employment both increase the risk for homelessness and make it more difficult for people to exit homelessness. Racial discrimination impedes efforts to obtain employment, creating a need to close existing loopholes in employment anti-discrimination policies (e.g., exemptions for some employers) and bolster enforcement of existing laws. Doing so could lower employment barriers that Black Americans experience.

◣ **Increase employment support for Black Californians.** Workforce initiatives that increase opportunities for workers to obtain jobs that pay a living wage are needed. Job training and apprenticeship programs that offer entry into jobs that pay a liveable wage, particularly for those without college degrees, can lift families out of poverty and homelessness. Employment navigators can help identify employment opportunities. These initiatives should recognize and address barriers to employment that Black individuals face in the job market (e.g., discrimination, carceral records).

◣ **Support efforts to raise the minimum wage.** Decreasing the disconnect between income and housing costs can reduce homelessness.

INCREASE ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING OPTIONS

California is one million units short of affordable and available housing for extremely low income (ELI) renters, of which Black renters are overrepresented.[57] There is a need to leverage multiple strategies (at the local, state, and federal) level to close this gap and increase housing options available and affordable to ELI households.

◣ **Bolster efforts to minimize discrimination in the housing market.** There is a need to strengthen the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws for housing. Efforts to reduce discrimination by property owners could be implemented locally. Other efforts such as master-leasing, in which a housing authority or organization serves as the lessee of many units and subleases to tenants, bypass property owners' ability to deny housing to a person based on race.

◣ **Invest in housing navigation.** In a market in which permanent housing options are scarce and Black Americans describe discrimination when searching for housing, housing navigation can support their efforts to return to housing. Housing navigation can support the usability of housing vouchers.

◣ **Incentivize affordable housing production and preservation.** In California, 24 units of housing are available and affordable for every 100 extremely low income renters.[58] Incentivizing production of deeply affordable housing is necessary to address this shortage. Leveraging existing mechanisms, such as the Low Income Housing Tax Credit, and addressing zoning related barriers to affordable housing production are needed to increase supply. Efforts to preserve affordability of units can prevent the stock of affordable housing from dwindling.

◣ **Increase availability of rental subsidies.** Black Californians are more likely to be renters, and more likely to be rent-burdened, than white Californians.[59] Black renters in the State are more likely than white renters to experience housing hardship—being late on rental payments or not being confident in their ability to make their next rental payment.[60] Despite these affordability challenges, only one in four Americans who are eligible receive federal rental assistance. Increasing rental subsidies can make housing more affordable for extremely low income Black Californians.

⬛ **Increase payment standard of federal rental assistance.** In many areas, there is a mismatch between the federal payment standard for housing vouchers and rental market rent. Black participants discussed how this mismatch limited their options for housing–often restricting them to units in underinvested neighborhoods and reinforcing racial and economic segregation patterns. Increasing the payment standard for rental assistance could increase access to housing units for Black Californians, who face constrained options due to discrimination and other structural barriers.

STRENGTHEN HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION

Black Californians reported lengthy and recurrent episodes of homelessness. They were more likely than those from other races to have previously experienced homelessness. Efforts to prevent homelessness can keep Black Californians stably housed, disrupting cycles between housing and homelessness.

⬛ **Expand and enforce eviction prevention efforts.** A third of Black Californians entered homelessness from a leaseholding situation in which they were formally named on a lease agreement and thus had legal protections. Expanding free legal counsel services for extremely low income tenants and promoting tenant–property owner mediation could stem inflows into homelessness.

⬛ **Engage in affirmative outreach to Black communities.** Few Black Californians reached out for help outside of their familial and social networks to prevent their homelessness. Engaging in affirmative outreach to Black Californians about resources available to prevent homelessness before those resources are needed could increase awareness. Siting prevention services or targeting prevention activities in neighborhoods that have faced disinvestment or segregation can help target resources appropriately. Working with Black-led organizations to provide these services can improve service delivery for the Black community.

⬛ **Prevent recurrence of homelessness for Black Californians through targeted prevention and housing retention efforts.** One of the most consistent predictors of future homelessness is a past experience of homelessness. Other predictors include growing up or losing housing in a neighborhood with a high area deprivation index score. Many people who exit homelessness do so without permanent rental support, which offers the strongest support against returns to homelessness. In the absence of rental subsidies, strengthening other support (e.g., workforce initiatives, case management) and targeting homelessness prevention efforts (flexible funding, mediation) to those who regain housing after an episode of homelessness could help prevent recurrence.

ADDRESS THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM TO HOMELESSNESS CYCLE

Black Americans are disproportionately represented in carceral populations. By creating barriers to employment and housing, criminal legal system records increase both the risk of homelessness and the difficulty of exiting homelessness. Efforts that target those involved with the criminal justice system could make a measurable difference in rates of Black people experiencing homelessness.

⬛ **Strengthen re-entry support for people exiting carceral settings.** Few exiting jails and prisons received reentry support. Among those who did, such support was not sufficient to prevent homelessness. Strengthening re-entry supports such as connections to affordable permanent housing options, employment opportunities, healthcare services, and government benefits could help reduce both inflows into homelessness and recidivism.

⬛ **Adopt approaches to addressing unsheltered homelessness that minimize law enforcement and prioritize connections to housing.** Nearly a third of Black Californians experienced a short-term jail stay during the current episode of homelessness. Approaches to addressing homelessness in public spaces should reduce law enforcement responses. These responses should connect those experiencing homelessness to permanent, low barrier housing options.

⬛ **Lower housing barriers for those with criminal justice records.** Tenant review processes should avoid consideration of criminal justice records.

⬛ **Expand "clean slate" approaches to carceral records.** Clean slate laws allow for clearance of arrest and conviction records after a period of time. Although California has a clean slate law, it has exceptions. Reducing exceptions, enforcing adherence to these laws, and enforcing anti-discrimination laws based on race could decrease barriers to housing and employment.

⬛ **Increase embedded support in transitional housing and ensure connections to permanent housing options.** Those who entered homelessness from extended jail and prison stays discussed how the transitional housing after release did not last long enough for them to obtain employment and housing post release, which led to their becoming homeless. To stem inflows into homelessness after transitional housing, there is a need to bolster embedded supports (e.g., employment and housing navigation). Those exiting carceral settings should be connected to Permanent Supportive Housing and other affordable housing options that are not time-limited.

SUPPORT EQUITABLE HEALTH OUTCOMES

Black Californians experiencing homelessness are in poor health, with high prevalence of chronic health conditions, functional limitations, and severe mental health symptoms, including a high proportion who experience hallucinations. Despite some being connected to healthcare systems, many faced barriers to accessing equitable, trauma-informed healthcare services.

⬛ **Address biases in health care systems through evidence-based training for healthcare workers.** Black Californians experiencing homelessness discussed the compounded impact of racism and discrimination based on their homelessness when accessing healthcare services. Healthcare workers should receive evidence-based anti-bias and anti-discrimination training to mitigate discrimination in these settings.

⬛ **Increase availability of racially concordant physical and mental health services.** Racially concordant care refers to alignment between the racial identity of a patient and their healthcare provider. While cultural competency efforts are needed, evidence supports racially concordant care's ability to engender increased trust, comfort, and ease of communication.[61] Dedicated investments into diversifying the healthcare workforce to increase representation of Black providers, including physical and mental health care providers, social workers, and case managers would improve outcomes.

⬛ **Increase use of peer health promotion models. Peer health care models can increase trust between marginalized populations and healthcare systems.**[62] Increasing the availability of peer health workers who are Black–particularly those who have lived experience of homelessness–can engender greater trust in healthcare systems.

⬛ **Increase availability of Permanent Supportive Housing and increase availability of voluntary services in Permanent Supportive Housing.** Black Californians report lower rates of substance use than those from other racial groups experiencing homelessness; however, these levels are still higher than in the general population. Black Californians experiencing homelessness were more likely than other racial groups to have serious mental health symptoms (i.e., hallucinations) and mental health hospitalizations. Many will need robust support when they return to housing. Permanent Supportive Housing with voluntary, evidence-based services is needed to expedite exits from homelessness for those with complex behavioral health needs. Black Californians experiencing homelessness are aging. Permanent Supportive Housing should be responsive to both behavioral health and aging-related needs.

⬛ **Increase the availability of voluntary substance use treatment responsive to the needs of the Black community.** Evidence strongly supports voluntary substance use treatment to improve outcomes. Among people experiencing homelessness, there are high rates of unmet need for substance use treatment. Increasing the availability of such treatment and ensuring that it meets the needs of the Black community is necessary.

⚑ Strengthen connections between housing and health care systems. Black Californians reported high rates of health insurance coverage, primarily Medi-Cal (California's Medicaid program). In recognition of housing as a social determinant of health, California received an 1115 Medicaid waiver to allow the Medicaid program to cover housing-adjacent services such as housing navigation and complex case management for Medicaid-eligible individuals with complex care needs or institutional involvement (e.g., those exiting carceral settings, foster youth). California is seeking a waiver to provide short-term rental support. Ensuring successful implementation of these programs can reduce the impact of homelessness on Black people. States without an 1115 waiver should consider applying for one.

ENSURE EQUITY IS EMBEDDED IN HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE SYSTEMS

Black Californians, who are overrepresented four-fold in California's homeless population, have experienced multiple forms of trauma across their life course. Responses to homelessness should be trauma informed, intentional about decreasing racial disparities, and include the voices of those impacted by homelessness in the Black community.

⚑ Improve assessment tools to address racial disparities in Coordinated Entry Systems (CES). Some coordinated entry prioritization schemes have perpetuated racial inequities. Black Californians, who experience homelessness less often due to individual vulnerabilities such as substance use than white Californians, can be deprioritized in assessment schemes that prioritize behavioral health needs. Coordinated Entry Systems should embed proxies that increase risk of homelessness for Black Californians into assessment schemes (e.g., contact with the carceral system, growing up or living in an area with a high neighborhood deprivation index) to address this disparity.

⚑ Ensure that CES recognizes the needs of parents separated from their children due to homelessness or CPS involvement. Many Black Californians who are categorized as single adults have minor children from whom they are separated due to homelessness or CPS involvement. Thus, they are not considered to be in a homeless family and do not receive priority for appropriate resources. Coordinated Entry Systems should address these individuals as a member of a homeless family and seek to extend appropriate resources, which could promote family reunification.

⚑ Invest in increasing Black leadership in homeless service systems and provide trauma-centered, anti-racism training for staff at all levels of the homelessness service delivery continuum. Black Californians reported disparate treatment when trying to access services during homelessness. Increasing the representation of Black-identified staff and including anti-racism training for staff can foster more equitable provision of services to clients. Investing in increasing leadership opportunities for Black homeless services systems can improve the delivery of services.

⚑ Create pathways for meaningful engagement with Black Californians with lived experience of homelessness. Centering Black lived experience is important for equitable program and policy design. Providing funding and ongoing support for Black-led organizations addressing homelessness in communities across the state could move homelessness response systems closer to equity. Further, ensuring that Black Californians with lived experience of homelessness are represented in any homelessness policy or programmatic design effort is important in promoting equity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To access the full report of the California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness, click here or scan the QR code below.
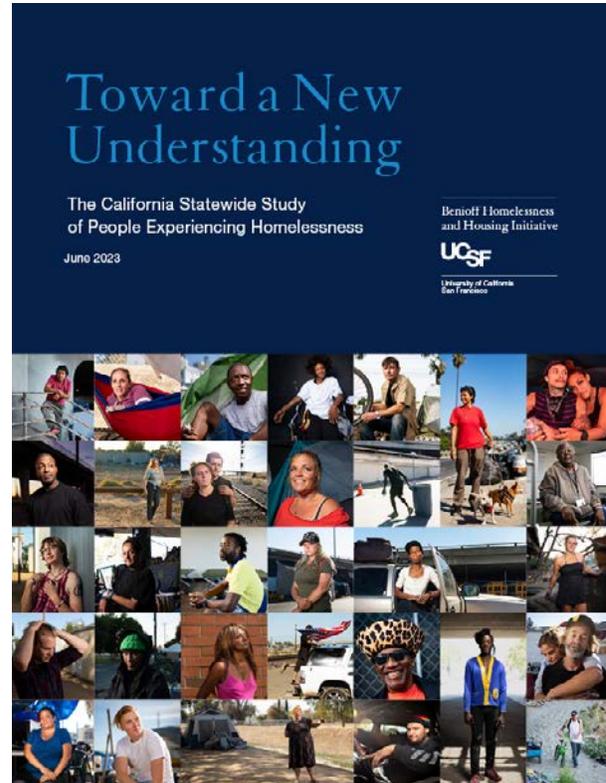
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63 All staff who contributed to the California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness (CASPEH) are acknowledged in the main CASPEH report here.

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