

## **Structural Racism and Racial Disparities in Homelessness Across the United States**

### *Abstract*

On a given night, nearly 600,000 individuals are experiencing homelessness in the United States. A disproportionate share of the unhoused are black. In 2022, the nationwide rate of black homelessness was nearly four times as high as the rate of white homelessness. This difference, however, ranges considerably across local communities. The rate of black homelessness is 3.2 times higher than white homelessness in Santa Barbara, but nearly 10 times higher in Santa Cruz. Using Point-in-Time data measuring local black and white homelessness rates from 2015 through 2022, we explore the relationship between structural racism and racial disparities in homelessness across the U.S. Focusing on the risk factors of evictions, incarceration, and unemployment, we find that structural racism contributes to black homelessness through two primary mechanisms: Unequal exposure and disproportionate impact. To understand how these mechanisms operate in individuals' lives, we conducted ten focus groups with over 70 unhoused individuals across the state of Illinois. In many ways, black respondents discussed how social isolation worsened the impact of traumatic events that eventually led to homelessness. Unfair treatment by service providers, discrimination from landlords, and post-incarceration or shelter placements in homes far from respondents' friends and family were major factors restricting much needed social and economic supports necessary to establish stable housing. These barriers both reflect and reinforce enduring structural arrangements that sustain racial disparities in homelessness.