
chapter

7

RACIALIZED PERSONS

Nick Falvo, PhD

Introduction

In most wealthy countries, racialized persons—also known as ‘people of colour’ or ‘racial/ethnic minorities’—are overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness. This has not happened by accident. Most countries have racist pasts and continue to see ongoing systemic racism, making it challenging for racialized persons to access social services—including housing, income assistance and health care.

Academically speaking, colonialism and ongoing racism predispose racialized persons

to high rates of the individual-level risk factors for homelessness discussed in Chapter 1 of the present textbook. These risk factors, which make some people more vulnerable to homelessness than others, include having a history in foster care, having been unemployed, and having been a victim of violence.

The present chapter will briefly discuss colonialism and racism before discussing promising practices in the homeless-serving sector.

In most wealthy countries, racialized persons—also known as ‘people of colour’ or ‘racial/ethnic minorities’—are overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness. This has not happened by accident.

Colonialism and racism

In order to understand some of the challenges faced by racialized persons, one must comprehend various historical factors, especially colonialism. Colonialism can include the forced removal of people from their land, the appropriation of land, the destruction of villages and crops, slavery, and vagrancy laws pertaining to freed slaves. Government-sanctioned violence has driven much of this.

Embedded in colonialism is racism, which Richard (2023) defines as

a system of advantages and disadvantages based on race...[This] includes individual-level beliefs and practices, cultural messages, public policies, and other interconnecting micro- and macrolevel dynamics that benefit White people and harm people of color...¹

Racism makes it more challenging for racialized persons to access mortgages and secure rental housing. It also makes it more challenging for them to thrive in educational settings, obtain employment, qualify for income assistance and receive health care. Racism also affects who gets targeted by law enforcement officials, who has access to legal representation, who goes to jail and for how long. It impacts which parents (mostly mothers) are targeted by child welfare officials and have their children taken into care. In a nutshell, racism affects how social services are delivered or refused.

Not surprisingly, in many countries racialized persons are overrepresented in the homeless population. In the words of Richard (2023): *“racism and discrimination across systems of housing, employment, wealth, welfare, and criminal justice [lead] people of color to be at greater risk of homelessness.”²*

Kithulgoda et al. (2022) further note:

people who identify as Black/African American, Native American, or Hispanic not only face discrimination in access to public resources through the welfare state...but have also long been excluded from equitable access to housing through multiple mechanisms, including planning, mortgaging, risky credit and neighborhood quality...and are over represented in the homeless population...³

In order to understand some of the challenges faced by racialized persons, one must comprehend various historical factors, especially colonialism.

Racism makes it more challenging for racialized persons to access mortgages and secure rental housing.

1 Richard, M. K. (2023). Race matters in addressing homelessness: A scoping review and call for critical research. *American Journal of Community Psychology*.

2 Richard, M. K. (2023). Race matters in addressing homelessness: A scoping review and call for critical research. *American Journal of Community Psychology*.

3 Kithulgoda, C. I., Vaithianathan, R., & Parsell, C. (2022). Racial and gender bias in self-reported needs when using a homelessness triaging tool. *Housing Studies*, 1-13.

At this juncture, it is probably not hard for most readers to see the links between colonialism, racism and homelessness. It is also not surprising that such historical factors predispose racialized persons to high rates of the individual-level risk factors for homelessness that are discussed in Chapter 1 of this textbook (e.g., having a history in foster care, having been unemployed, being a victim of violence, etc.).

Put differently, when one reflects on some of the major causes of homelessness discussed in Chapter 1, marries that with the legacy of colonialism and historic trauma, and then considers present-day systemic racism, it is no mystery as to why racialized persons often experience homelessness at higher rates than non-racialized persons.

In the homeless-serving sector, assessment tools that prioritize need for services (e.g., housing and related services) often assess a person's need or vulnerability. These can create further challenges for racialized persons. Much research has found that such triage tools, which often rely on a client self-reporting past events, can sometimes prioritize white persons over racialized persons. Research done by Kithulgoda et al. (2022) has found that racialized persons can be less likely to report certain vulnerabilities *"especially if the interviewer is from a different racial or cultural group..."* According to the authors: *"People with histories of incarceration have learnt to not disclose their experiences with the criminal justice system in their attempts to access housing..."* The same holds for racialized mothers who have had their children taken from them by child protection authorities.⁴

⁴ Kithulgoda, C. I., Vaithianathan, R., & Parsell, C. (2022). Racial and gender bias in self-reported needs when using a homelessness triaging tool. *Housing Studies*, 1-13.

Promising practices

In light of the many challenges experienced by racialized peoples with respect to homelessness, it is important to work towards improving outcomes—however they may be defined. What follow are some examples.

Funding injections. In most countries, social services for racialized persons are severely underfunded; important funding injections could help to both prevent and respond to homelessness among racialized persons. This includes targeted funding for education, employment, healthcare, early childhood development (e.g., daycare), income assistance, housing (including appropriate wraparound supports), eviction prevention initiatives, emergency facilities, and homeless outreach services.

Representation. According to Olivet et al. (2021), non-profit organizations in the homeless-serving sector “should diversify staff, leadership, and boards of directors to include significant representation by people of color...”⁵ Better representation can yield more culturally appropriate services; it can also send a ‘you belong here’ message to racialized staff and clients.

On-site cultural programming. Whether you operate an emergency shelter, a daytime drop-in service, or housing, it can be beneficial to offer culturally relevant services onsite on a regular basis. Such programming might include music, arts and crafts, language support, and food-related support that might be relevant to racialized persons.

In most countries, social services for racialized persons are severely underfunded; important funding injections could help to both prevent and respond to homelessness among racialized persons.

It is very important for non-profit agencies to help organize regularly occurring staff training on anti-racism, led by racialized persons.

Staff training. It is very important for non-profit agencies to help organize regularly occurring staff training on anti-racism, led by racialized persons. This can come in the form of all-day training sessions for all staff, and should occur at least once per year. Staff should also be encouraged to seek anti-racism training outside such in-house events in the local community.

Guest presentations. While full-day trainings can be very meaningful, guest presentations on anti-racism can be shorter and more frequent (indeed, such presentations can have a duration of one hour or less). They can be made by staff who work at other non-profit organizations, consultants, and university-based researchers. Presentations can be directed at staff, board members or clients. One possibility is to have lunch-time presentations for staff in 9-5 work settings; another is to have

⁵ Olivet, J., Wilkey, C., Richard, M., Dones, M., Tripp, J., Beit-Arie, M., Yampolskaya, S., & Cannon, R. (2021). Racial inequity and homelessness: findings from the SPARC study. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 693(1), 82-100. Quote is taken from p. 98.

Racialized persons should be involved in the development of any evaluation framework—or at least the portions focused on racialized persons.

an evening speaker series at an emergency facility or apartment building. Presenters should be paid for their time (and preparation) and have their expenses covered.

Ongoing evaluation and oversight. Organizations serious about improving services delivered by and for racialized persons should endeavour to hold themselves accountable. Accountability mechanisms may include an evaluation framework with inputs, outputs and outcomes specific to racialized clients. It might also include an annual survey specifically for racialized staff and clients. Racialized persons should be involved in the development of any evaluation framework—or at least the portions focused on racialized persons. That way, they can advise on what is meaningful, how best to phrase questions, how to approach data collection, and how to share evaluation findings. Exit interviews with staff can include questions about racism.

The City of Toronto's common assessment tool. Over the years, the City of Toronto has received a considerable amount of criticism from stakeholders about existing common assessment tools in the homeless-serving sector. This has included criticism related to racial bias. City of Toronto staff therefore began to develop their own tool in 2015. Now known as the Service Triage, Assessment and Referral Support (STARS), it has three components:

1. Intake and triage. The person's basic demographic information goes into the database system. This happens once a person agrees to be helped and agrees to start providing such information.
2. Housing assessment. This starts within seven days of intake into shelter, as stipulated in the City of Toronto's Shelter Standards.
3. Comprehensive assessment. This covers supports related to mental health, substance use, physical health and employment. The person will also be asked what kinds of supports they are already receiving in these respects.

STARS is more qualitative than quantitative. Prioritization depends in part on which persons have been using the most shelter beds for an extended period. The database automatically calculates chronicity based on the federal government definition. Exceptions get made to such prioritization, including for youth and for Indigenous persons (the latter tend to experience more episodic homelessness in Canada). With the City's Coordinated Access system, there is a rotating system whereby one City-funded organization will be approached at a time, often with 1-2 housing units available at once. The City gives the organization a 'short list' from their data, and asks the organization to work with the City on the referrals. The organization might dispute the list, and then provide alternative clients for referral.

While this City of Toronto innovation is recent, it represents a concerted attempt by one municipality to work collaboratively with marginalized communities to address racial bias in assessments tools.

Conclusion

A history of colonialism and systemic racism have made racialized persons more vulnerable to homelessness. As a result, racialized persons in many wealthy countries experience homelessness at higher rates than do white persons. Fortunately, much can be done to

address this. Promising practices include funding injections, cultural programming, improved representation, staff training, guest presentations, ongoing evaluation and oversight, and a 'locally grown' assessment tool that seeks to address racial bias.

A history of colonialism and systemic racism have made racialized persons more vulnerable to homelessness. As a result, racialized persons in many wealthy countries experience homelessness at higher rates than do white persons.

Further reading

Fowle, M. Z. (2022). Racialized homelessness: A review of historical and contemporary causes of racial disparities in homelessness. *Housing Policy Debate*, 32(6), 940-967.

Fusaro, V. A., Levy, H. G., & Shaefer, H. L. (2018). Racial and ethnic disparities in the lifetime prevalence of homelessness in the United States. *Demography*, 55(6), 2119-2128.

Kithulgoda, C. I., Vaithianathan, R., & Parsell, C. (2022). Racial and gender bias in self-reported needs when using a homelessness triaging tool. *Housing Studies*, 1-13.

Netto, G. (2006). Vulnerability to homelessness, use of services and homelessness prevention in black and minority ethnic communities. *Housing Studies*, 21(4), 581-601.

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

Paul Jr, D. W., Knight, K. R., Olsen, P., Weeks, J., Yen, I. H., & Kushel, M. B. (2020). Racial discrimination in the life course of older adults experiencing homelessness: results from the HOPE HOME study. *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, 29(2), 184-193.

Richard, M. K. (2023). Race matters in addressing homelessness: A scoping review and call for critical research. *American Journal of Community Psychology*.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12700>

About the author

Nick Falvo is a research consultant based in Calgary, Canada. He has a PhD in Public Policy and is Editor-in-Chief, North America, of the *International Journal on Homelessness*. He has academic affiliation at both Carleton University and Case Western Reserve University. Prior to pursuing his PhD, he spent 10 years doing front-line work directly with persons experiencing homelessness.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the following individuals for assistance with this chapter: Victor Atilola, Doug Chaudron, Susan Falvo, Matt Fowle, Mark Joseph, Michael Lyster, Michelle Martel, Jenny Morrow, Cameron Parsell, Rachel Reichert, David Reycraft, Molly Richard, Steven Richardson, Joel Sinclair, Necole Small, Reyme Virk, Thyron Lee Whyte, Lambert Williams and Dean Mang-Wooley. Any errors are the responsibility of the author.

About this project

This is Chapter 7 of a sole-authored, open access interdisciplinary textbook intended to provide an introduction to homelessness for students, service providers, researchers and advocates. Focusing on the English-speaking countries of the OECD, it will discuss causes, solutions, challenges, successes, and innovations in the sector. It will serve as ‘launching pad’ for people new to the sector, as well as a refresher for experienced practitioners.

In addition to being open access, this book is different from other books in two key ways: 1) by focusing on all English-speaking countries of the OECD; and 2) by providing an overview of recent innovations in the sector—i.e., what’s new, and what’s working well?—making it useful to practitioners.

- The book’s **intent** is primarily to serve as the main textbook for a university course designed for senior-level undergraduate as well as graduate students. It also serves as a resource for senior leadership in the homelessness sector.
- Book’s **main themes**: contributing factors to homelessness; health conditions and health care challenges of persons experiencing homelessness; the unique needs of various subpopulations; staffing challenges in the sector; an in-depth examination of innovative practices; and solutions to homelessness.
- Book **objectives**: assist readers in understanding the fundamentals of homelessness; introduce them to both successes and ongoing challenges in the sector; and leave them feeling better-informed, able to make critical assessments, confident and empowered to take action within their own respective spheres of influence.

Table of contents (anticipated)

- I. THE BASICS
 1. What causes homelessness?
 2. Theory and homelessness
 3. Rough sleeping and encampments
 4. Emergency facilities
 5. Health and health conditions
- II. SUBPOPULATIONS
 6. Indigenous peoples
 7. Racialized persons
 8. Women
 9. Youth
 10. Older adults
 11. LGBTQ2S
 12. Intersectionality
- III. THE RESPONSES
 13. Tracking, enumerating and categorizing
 14. How officials respond to homelessness
 15. Housing First
 16. System planning
 17. Staffing
- IV. EMERGING THEMES
 18. Overdose crisis
 19. Aging population
 20. COVID-19 pandemic
 21. Climate change and mass migrations
- V. INNOVATIVE PRACTICES
 22. Artificial intelligence
 23. Prevention initiatives
 24. Taxation earmarked for homelessness

Target audience

- The book is intended primarily for course use, its primary audience being senior undergraduate students, graduate students and course instructors in English-speaking countries of the OECD. It can also be useful to senior leadership in the homelessness sector (e.g., board members, CEOs and staff).
- The book is intended for courses where homelessness is either the only focus or a major focus. For example, a course on housing and homelessness could benefit from this book. Standalone chapters could also be of great value in various disciplines.
- Some of these courses might be taught outside of the university setting—for example, by the UK-based Chartered Institute of Housing and by its counterparts in other countries, such as CIH Canada.
- The book can be used as either a primary or supplementary text.
- The book is intended to have international appeal, focusing on the English-speaking countries of the OECD: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
- Homelessness is widely researched and quickly evolving, as new approaches to both prevention and response are being developed. Much of the book's content will therefore be new even to experienced researchers and practitioners.

All material for this book is available free of charge at <https://nickfalvo.com/>. Newly-completed chapters will be uploaded throughout the year. The author can be reached at falvo.nicholas@gmail.com.