

## **Homelessness in America – A Racial Issue**

Over 600,000 Americans are homeless, out on the streets, sleeping in doorways or abandoned cars or, if they are “lucky,” huddled in homeless shelters. The great majority of those seeking a place in a homeless shelter are black. The Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness recently published a report that reveals that in 2010 blacks were seven times more likely to seek refuge in a homeless shelter than whites.

### **Racial Disparities**

The report, “Intergenerational Disparities Experienced by Homeless Black Families,” provides data on homelessness in dozens of American cities. In New York City, for example, while blacks comprised 25.2 percent of the general population in 2010, they were 55.9 percent of the shelter population. Conversely, white New Yorkers, 36.1 percent of the general population, comprised just 1.9 percent of those living in homeless shelters.

The report is the subject of an article – “Homelessness: It’s About Race, Not Just Poverty” - in *City Limits* magazine by Dr. Ralph da Costa Nunez, president and CEO of the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, and an adjunct professor at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs. He has worked with homeless families for over 25 years, starting in the administration of New York City Mayor Ed Koch in the early 1980s. He is also a trustee of the Community Service Society.

Of course, homelessness is the result of poverty. Nearly one-quarter of black families live in poverty. But the report digs deeper. It looks at the social and structural problems that affect the nation’s black communities.

Most of us do not see poverty every day. And if we do, we usually don’t think of the scale of poverty, or of its effects on homelessness – for instance, the fact that there are 1.6 million homeless children across the country. In New York City, more than 40,000 children live in shelters; 50,000 students attending the city’s public schools are homeless.

### **Effects of Poverty**

We assume the homeless are poor. We have known and felt discrimination in employment, housing, public services, and education. While no longer government sanctioned or legal, the effects of discrimination still have a vast corrosive effect on the lives of millions of black families.

For example, with lower educational attainment and lack of employment opportunities, blacks, especially young black men, are often caught in the criminal justice system, where they are likely to suffer longer sentences than white offenders for comparable crimes. When they reenter society, the “civil death” of a criminal conviction almost assures that they will be unable to get a

decent job or place to live. The result is often a trip back to prison. New York State's recidivism rate is one of the highest in the nation.

Segregated housing in urban areas almost always means substandard education, lack of jobs, and inferior public services for black communities, all of which are precursors of poverty. Now, with a faltering economy, government retrenchment has meant major cuts to programs critical to the most vulnerable among us. New York State has cut millions from emergency food and eviction prevention programs. Last month, 8,000 city households – virtually all black or Latino - were notified that their housing assistance rental vouchers were ending because of cutbacks by the state. Legal Aid sued to keep the vouchers in place; they lost.

### **Criminalizing Homelessness**

There is a veritable war on the homeless in many places throughout this nation – cities passing laws prohibiting begging or loitering, or sleeping in public places, as if the homeless had anywhere else to go. The criminalization of homelessness ensures that more and more homeless Americans get arrested. But these arrests are self-defeating. They often mean that a homeless person with a criminal record cannot live in public housing or get a job, hardly helping to deal with the problem.

Still, the homeless often work, even if they cannot afford housing. Nationally, more than two in five of the homeless have jobs. Of course, these are almost all minimum wage, dead-end jobs, with no chance of improvement. So poverty and homelessness have become intergenerational in America.

The Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness and Ralph da Costa Nunez should be praised for this report, which raises the question rarely asked in public debate: Why is homelessness in America a racial issue? The uncomfortable answer is because of public policies or neglect that are often the result of private prejudices. As Dr. da Costa Nunez stated in his article, "It will take all of us as a nation to voice our intolerance of policies that make it difficult for some to ever rise out of poverty."

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