



# SPARC

Supporting Partnerships for  
Anti-Racist Communities



## Phase One Study Findings

**MARCH 2018**



Center for  
**Social Innovation**

## Authors

Jeffrey Olivet

Marc Dones

Molly Richard

Catriona Wilkey

Svetlana Yampolskaya

Maya Beit-Arie

Lunise Joseph

---

## Acknowledgments

The SPARC team would like to acknowledge the Oak Foundation, whose generous support allowed us to launch the initiative.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Raikes Foundation provided funding for the SPARC National Summit and were intimately involved in summit planning and execution.

We would like to thank our partners and local funders in the SPARC communities, whose passion and insight continues to inspire us.

*Atlanta, Georgia:* Mercy Care; Partners for HOME; United Way of Greater Atlanta

*Columbus, Ohio:* Community Shelter Board; Columbus Urban League; United Way of Central Ohio

*Dallas, Texas:* Metro Dallas Homeless Alliance; United Way of Metropolitan Dallas

*San Francisco, California:* The City of San Francisco; Haas Foundation; HandUP; San Francisco Foundation

*Syracuse, New York:* Allyn Family Foundation; Central New York Community Foundation; Rescue Mission Alliance of Syracuse

*Pierce County, Washington:* The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; The City of Tacoma; Pierce County Human Services; University of Puget Sound

Finally, we are most grateful to the courageous individuals who were willing to share their stories with us. Their strength in the face of structural racism is inspiring, and their wisdom guides our way to finding better ways to create a good and just society.



# Contents

Executive Summary .....	4
Background .....	6
Methods .....	8
Findings .....	9
Discussion .....	15
Recommendations .....	19
Conclusion .....	21

# Executive Summary

People of color are dramatically more likely than White people to experience homelessness in the United States. This is no accident; it is the result of centuries of structural racism that have excluded historically oppressed people—particularly Black and Native Americans—from equal access to housing, community supports, and opportunities for economic mobility.

In September 2016, the Center for Social Innovation launched SPARC (Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities) to understand and respond to racial inequities in homelessness. Through research and action in six communities, SPARC has begun a national conversation about racial equity in the homelessness sector.

Through an ambitious mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) study, the SPARC team documented high rates of homelessness among people of color and began to map their pathways into and barriers to exit from homelessness. The team analyzed 111,563 individual records of people from HMIS (homeless management information systems) in SPARC partner communities (representing data aggregated across years 2013-2015); administered a provider workforce demographic survey; collected 148 oral histories of people of color experiencing homelessness; and conducted 18 focus groups in six communities across the United States.

Key findings include:

## Demographics

The SPARC team analyzed HMIS data for each SPARC community as well as general population numbers and poverty population numbers in the United States and in each SPARC community. The results were astounding:

- Approximately two-thirds of people experiencing homelessness in SPARC communities were Black (64.7%), while 28.0% were White. 6.9% identified as Hispanic/Latinx\*. In total 78.3% of people experiencing homelessness were people of color.

\* Latinx is a gender-neutral form used in lieu of Latino and Latina.

- By comparison, the general population of the U.S. was 73.8% White, 12.4% Black, and 17.2% Hispanic/Latinx.
- Black people were the most overrepresented among individuals ages 18-24 experiencing homelessness, accounting for 78.0% of this group. This group also had the highest over representation of people of color broadly with 89.1% of 18-24 year olds identifying as people of color.
- More than two-thirds (67.6%) of individuals over the age of 25 experiencing homelessness were Black, and 56.3% of individuals presenting as family members were Black.
- Rates of Native American homelessness were also disproportionately high. In SPARC communities, homelessness among American Indian/Alaskan Natives was three to eight times higher than their proportion of the general population.
- Poverty alone does not explain the inequity. The proportion of Black and American Indian and Alaska Native individuals experiencing homelessness exceeds their proportion of those living in deep poverty.



## Homeless Services Workforce

The homeless services workforce is not representative of the people it serves:

- Those working in senior management positions were 65.8% White, 12.6% Black, and 10.1% Hispanic/Latinx.
- Staff in all other jobs were 52.3% White, 22.1% Black, and 14.8% Hispanic/Latinx.

## Key Domains Influencing Homelessness for People of Color

The oral histories revealed five major areas of focus regarding racial inequity and homelessness:

1. **Economic Mobility.** Lack of economic capital within social networks precipitates homelessness for many people of color.
2. **Housing.** The unavailability of safe and affordable housing options presents both risk of homelessness and barriers to permanently exiting homelessness.
3. **Criminal Justice.** Involvement in the criminal justice system, especially when such involvement results in a felony, can create ongoing challenges in obtaining jobs and housing.
4. **Behavioral Health.** People of color experience high rates of traumatic stress, mental health issues, and substance use. Behavioral health care systems are not responsive to the specific needs of people of color.
5. **Family Stabilization.** Multi-generational involvement in the child welfare and foster care systems often occur prior to and during experiences of homelessness, and people of color are often exposed to individual and community level violence.

## Implications

This study is grounded in the lived experience of people of color experiencing homelessness, and it offers numerous insights for policy makers, researchers, organizational leaders, and community members as they work to address homeless-

ness in ways that are comprehensive and racially equitable.

The demographics alone are shocking—the vast and disproportionate number of people in the homeless population in communities across the United States is a testament to the historic and persistent structural racism that exists in this country. Collective responses to homelessness must take such inequity into account.

**"Lack of economic capital within social networks precipitates homelessness for many people of color."**

Equitable strategies to address homelessness must include programmatic and systems level changes, and they must begin seriously to address homelessness prevention. It is not enough to move people of color out of homelessness if the systems are simply setting people up for a revolving door of substandard housing and housing instability. Efforts must begin to go upstream into other systems—criminal justice, child welfare, foster care, education, and healthcare—and implement solutions that stem the tide of homelessness at the point of inflow.

This brief report aims to present quantitative and qualitative findings from the SPARC study, examine what can be learned from these data, and begin crafting strategies to create a response to the homelessness crisis that is grounded in racial equity. Additional articles, reports, and other publications are forthcoming that will delve more deeply into specific insights gleaned from this project.

## Background

**H**omelessness in America is a national tragedy. For decades, through a combination of ill-conceived public policy, inadequate funding, negative stereotypes, and public fatigue, the nation has allowed the crisis of homelessness to grow to epidemic proportions. The causes of homelessness have often been misunderstood, with the general public often blaming individual mental illness, substance use, and unemployment—or worse, ascribing homelessness to moral failings, bad choices, or laziness. These individual vulnerabilities play a role in determining who becomes homeless, but do not, in and of themselves, explain the scope of homelessness. The root causes of homelessness are structural: lack of affordable housing, economic immobility, and systemic racism.

One symptom of the country's continuing racial inequity is that people of color are disproportionately represented in

the homeless population. While these racial disparities have been documented since the 1980s, research, advocacy, and policy have lagged behind.<sup>1,2</sup> The homelessness sector has offered color-blind solutions to a problem that requires an acute focus on racial equity to solve.

Homelessness does not affect all racial and ethnic groups equally—Black and Native Americans in particular are dramatically more likely to become homeless than their White counterparts, and they face unique barriers to exiting homelessness. Although Black people comprise 13% of the general population in the United States and 26% of those living in poverty, they account for more than 40% of the homeless population,<sup>3,4</sup> suggesting that poverty rates alone do not explain the over-representation.<sup>5</sup> High rates of homelessness among Black Americans is documented across all age groups, including youth, families, and single adults,

**"Although Black people comprise 13% of the general population in the United States and 26% of those living in poverty, they account for more than 40% of the homeless population, suggesting that poverty rates alone do not explain the over-representation."**



and across geographic diversity. In the 2017 Voices of Youth Count, Black youth had an 83% higher risk of experiencing homelessness compared to youth of other races.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, a study of shelter utilization in New York City and Philadelphia found that Black people were 16 times more likely to utilize shelters than Whites.<sup>7</sup> Even more staggering, the study showed that Black children under the age of five were 29 times more likely than White children to be in homeless shelters.

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations also experience homelessness at disproportionate rates. In 2016, people identifying as AI/AN made up about 4.2% of the unsheltered homeless population nationally, but about 1% of the total U.S. population.

The experience of Hispanic/Latinx homelessness is less clear. While the 2016 one-year estimates of sheltered homelessness found 12.8% were Hispanic/Latinx and one-night estimates of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness found 22.1% of the overall homeless population to be Hispanic/Latinx,<sup>4</sup> researchers speculate that such counts may be an underestimate. Recent immigrants may be more likely to double up or live in substandard housing, and undocu-

mented people and families with members of “mixed-doc” status may avoid shelter and services out of fear.<sup>8</sup>

Homelessness reflects the failure of our social systems to serve people of all racial and ethnic groups equally in housing, education, employment, wealth accumulation, health care, and justice.

In September 2016, the Center for Social Innovation launched SPARC (Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities) to examine the intersections of race and homelessness and to advance racial equity in the homelessness sector. The ultimate goal of this work is to end homelessness in the United States for all people by better understanding and eliminating the disparities experienced by people of color. The SPARC approach is to conduct rigorous mixed methods research and assist communities in transforming their homelessness response systems through a racial equity perspective. As of January 2018, SPARC has engaged six communities as an initial cohort in this work; together with the SPARC team, these communities are leading the nation in equity-based responses to homelessness. This report summarizes the project’s initial research findings and recommendations.

# Methods

The first phase of SPARC research involved an ambitious mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) study of race and homelessness in six American communities. Findings in this report are based on data analyzed for:

1. How rates of homelessness for people of color compare to the general population and the population of people living in deep poverty (<50% of federal poverty rate).
2. Pathways into homelessness for people of color.
3. Barriers to exiting homelessness for people of color.
4. Experiences of people of color within the homelessness response system.

## Communities in the study were:

- » Atlanta, Georgia
- » Columbus, Ohio
- » Dallas, Texas
- » San Francisco, California
- » Syracuse, New York
- » Pierce County, Washington

For quantitative analysis included in this report, the SPARC team examined three years of homeless management information system (HMIS) data from the SPARC communities, along with data from the U.S. Census Bureau on the general population and on the population in deep poverty.<sup>9</sup>

To learn more about the race and ethnicity of people working in housing and homeless service programs in, the research team administered an online survey to service providers in SPARC communities.\*

For qualitative findings included in this report, the SPARC team collected and analyzed 148 oral histories from people of color experiencing homelessness. These semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in each of the six SPARC communities and included participants from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and diverse age groups.

Additionally, three focus groups were held in each community, for a total of 18 focus groups. These included:

- People of color experiencing homelessness
- Direct service providers who identified as people of color
- Community stakeholders (e.g., people in leadership positions in homelessness systems or in connected systems such as housing, criminal justice, poverty assistance, public health, and child welfare)

Research was conducted according to ethical standards and this study has been approved by Heartland Institutional Review Board.

## Limitations

Various aspects of the study's design limit the generalizability of findings. While the research team attempted to recruit and enroll communities of different sizes from a wide geographical range, the six SPARC communities are not necessarily a representative sample. Additionally, the qualitative data may not reflect the experiences of other geographical locations or other people disconnected from services. Another limitation is the lack of a White comparison group for the interviews, which would, in future research, help shape an understanding of the differences in the experience of homelessness for White people and people of color.

Despite these limitations, the size and scope of this study offers a wide-ranging set of findings that can serve as a foundation for improvements in policy, practice, and future research.

\* In this report, provider survey results are presented using data from four SPARC communities, as workforce data for two communities were unavailable.



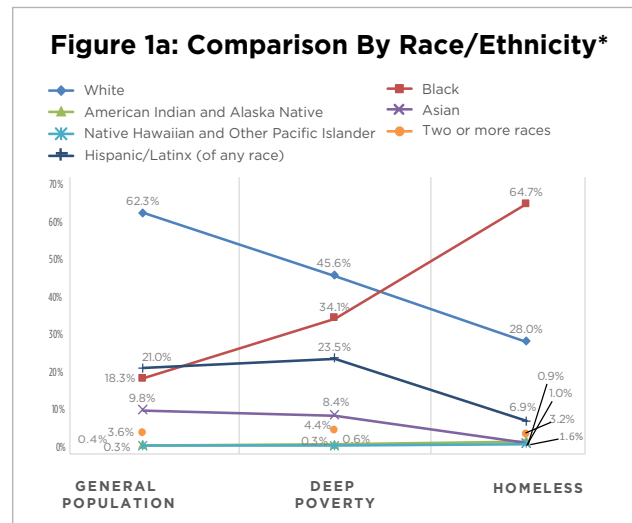
# Findings

Based on quantitative and qualitative analyses conducted by the SPARC team, the data presented in this report show demographics of people served by the homeless service systems in SPARC communities; high level findings from the provider workforce survey; and major themes from the qualitative interviews and focus groups.

## Quantitative Data

### Demographics

Figures 1 and 1a show aggregate data for five SPARC communities\*, comparing the racial/ethnic breakdown of the general population, the population in deep poverty, and the homeless population.† These data are then compared to overall national numbers. The SPARC aggregate sample consisted of 111,563 individuals from five communities across years 2013-2015.



56.3% were male, 43.5% were female, and 0.2% identified as transgender, although this gender category is likely underreported due to inconsistent data collection. Nearly two-thirds of the sample were Black (64.7%), while 28.0% were White. The percentage of Hispanic/Latinx individuals (of any race) was 6.9%. In total 78.3% of people experiencing homelessness were people of color.

**Figure 1: Racial Inequity Demographic Data\***

SPARC Communities (Aggregate)	General Population	Deep Poverty	Homeless
White	62.3%	45.6%	28.0%
Black	18.3%	34.1%	64.7%
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.4%	0.6%	1.6%
Asian	9.8%	8.4%	1.0%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.3%	0.3%	0.9%
Two or more races	3.6%	4.4%	3.2%
Hispanic/Latinx (of any race)	21.0%	23.5%†	6.9%

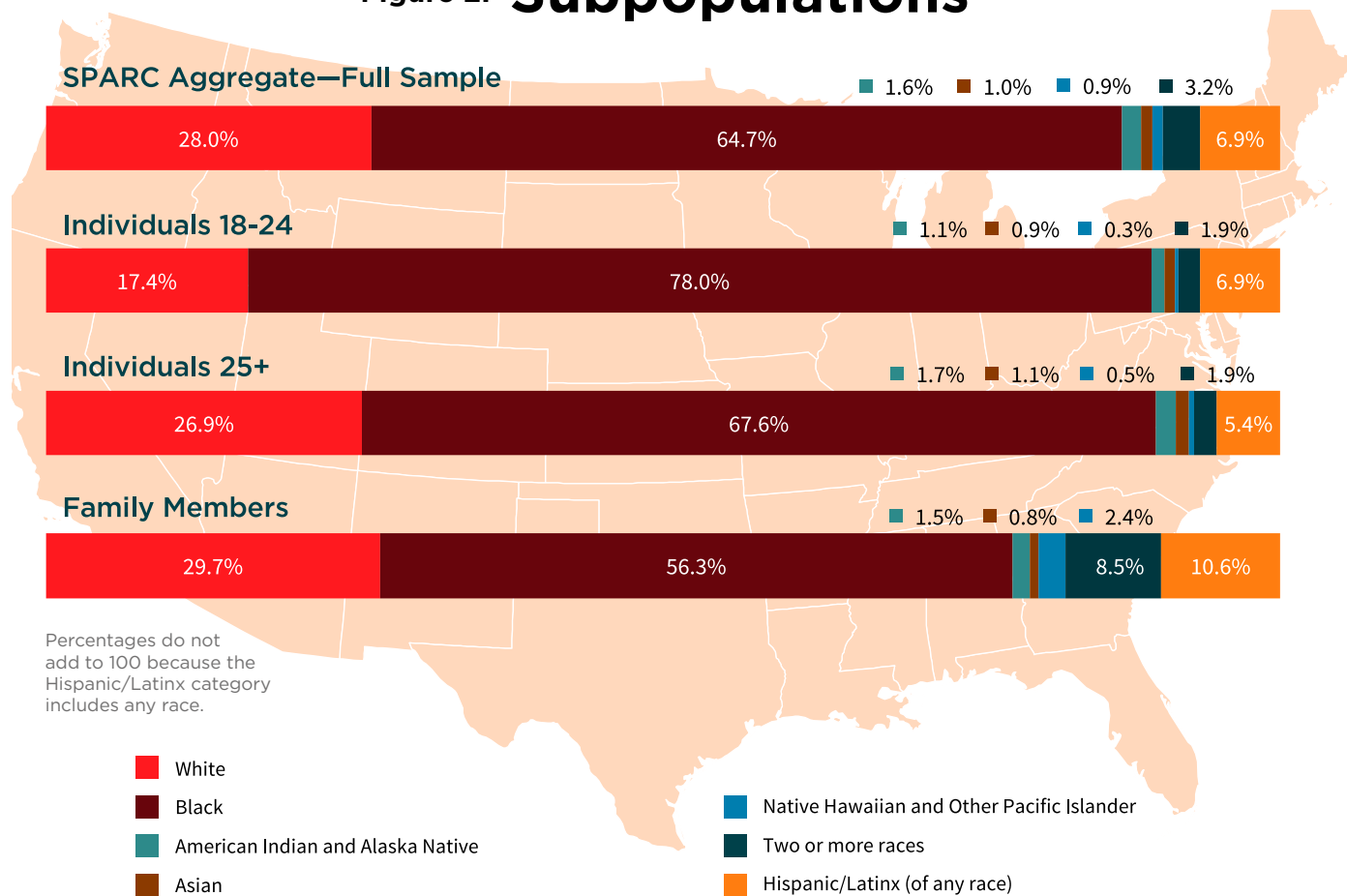
  

United States	General Population	Deep Poverty	Homeless
White	73.8%	59.7%	48.6%
Black	12.4%	23.5%	42.6%
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.8%	1.6%	2.5%
Asian	5.2%	4.6%	0.8%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.2%	1.1%
Two or more races	3.0%	3.9%	4.6%
Hispanic/Latinx (of any race)	17.2%	24.3%	16.9%

\* This report includes demographic data from five of the six SPARC communities. Data for the sixth were not available at time of publication.

† Homelessness is defined as being represented in the HMIS data. This may also include those in permanent supportive housing. Deep poverty is defined as 50% of the Federal Poverty Line or less. General population and deep poverty data are from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

**Figure 2: Subpopulations**



Notably, across all SPARC communities, Black and American Indians/Alaskan Natives (AI/AN) were overrepresented in the homeless population compared to the general population and the population in deep poverty.

The mean age of the sample was 33 ( $M = 32.72$ ;  $SD = 18.69$ ). Household status varied: 15.9% of the sample were single individuals between the ages of 18-24<sup>‡</sup>; 57.3% were single individuals 25 years and older; and 26.8% were individuals presenting as part of a household or head of household (i.e., family members). **Figure 2** shows the race breakdown of each of the three household groups compared to the SPARC aggregate data. Black people were most overrepresented among individuals 18-24, accounting for 78.0% of this group. This group also had the highest overrepresentation of people of color broadly with 89.1% of 18-24

year olds identifying as people of color.

More than two-thirds (67.6%) of individuals over 25 were Black, and 56.3% of individuals presenting as family members were Black.

*Predictors of exiting into homelessness, permanent housing with a subsidy, and permanent housing without a subsidy.*

Multivariate logistic regressions were conducted to examine predictors associated with exiting the HMIS system into one of three outcomes: homelessness; permanent housing *with* a subsidy; and, permanent housing *without* a subsidy. These discrete outcomes represent only three of many possible exit destinations in HMIS. Project exit indicates the end of a client’s partic-

<sup>‡</sup> Isolating data on unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness is difficult due to variations across communities. For the purposes of this report, young adults ages 18-24 were separated from adults 25 and over in order to examine differences between young adults and adults who would not be classified as youth/young adult.

ipation with an HMIS project (e.g., Emergency Shelter, Street Outreach, Safe Haven, Transitional Housing, Rapid Re-housing). Use of this data element may vary depending on project type. “Exiting into homelessness” means that someone left the project for a place not meant for human habitation or for emergency shelter (including motel with a voucher).

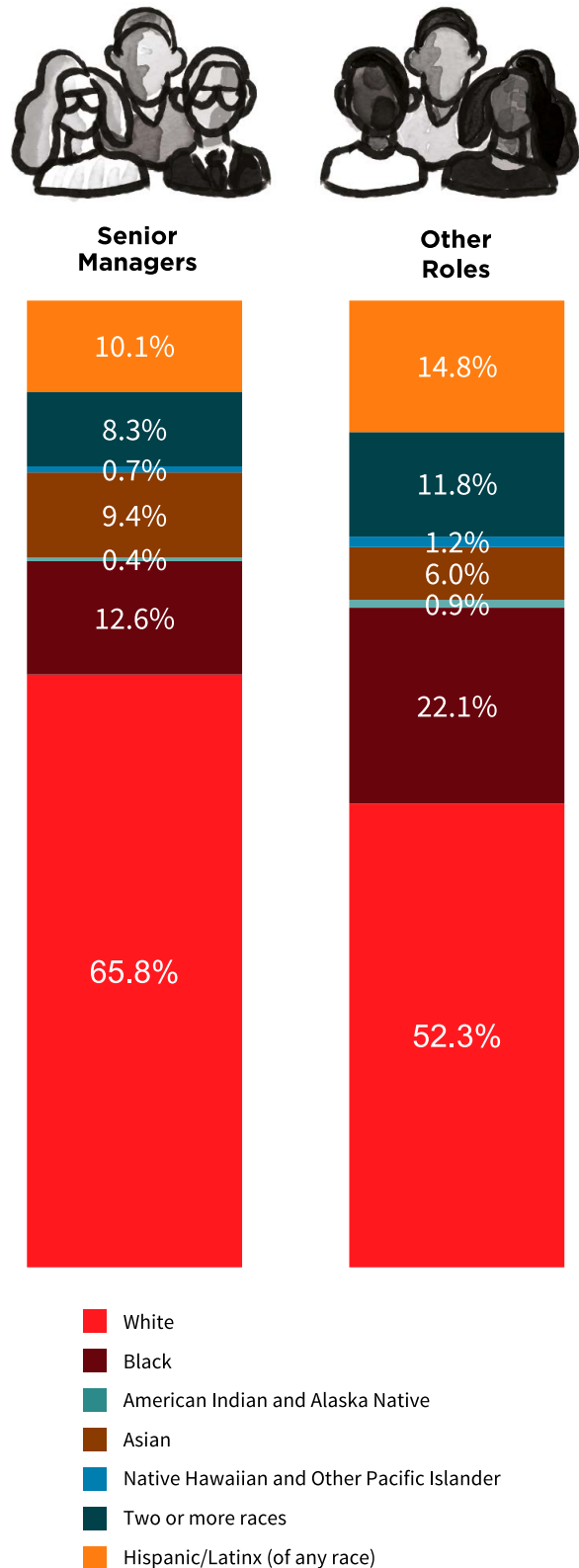
Examining **exits into homelessness**, gender, one race category, and household status were statistically significant. Compared to women, men were over two and a half times *less* likely (OR = 0.39,  $p < .05$ ), and transgender individuals were over two times *less* likely (OR = 0.45,  $p < .05$ ) to exit into homelessness; American Indian or Alaska Natives were 48% *more* likely to exit into homelessness compared to Whites (OR = 1.48,  $p < .05$ ). Household status was also significant: individuals ages 18-24 were over three and a half times *more* likely (OR = 3.58,  $p < .05$ ) to exit into homelessness compared to individuals in households (i.e., family members), and individuals 25 and older were over six times *more* likely (OR = 6.14,  $p < .05$ ) to exit into homelessness compared to individuals in households.

Examination of **exits into permanent housing** produced similar patterns: men were more likely than women to exit into permanent housing both with and without a subsidy. Only two racial categories showed significance: Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders were more likely to exit into permanent housing *with* a subsidy and American Indian or Alaska Natives were less likely to exit into permanent housing *without* a subsidy. Otherwise, racial/ethnic groups were not statistically significant in these models. Household status was an important predictor in exit outcomes: both individuals ages 18-24 and individuals 25 and older were statistically significantly less likely to exit into either permanent housing situation compared to individuals in households (i.e., family members).

### Workforce

The provider workforce survey included data from 1,022 individuals working in homeless service agencies. Those working in senior management (e.g., executive directors, board members, or clinical/program directors) were 65.8% White, 12.6% Black, and 10.1% Hispanic/Latinx. Staff

**Figure 3:**  
**Workforce Demographics**





reporting all other roles (e.g., case managers, therapists, facilities staff, or support staff) were 52.3% White, 22.1% Black, and 14.8% Hispanic/Latinx (see **Figure 3**). Almost a quarter (23.4%) of the workforce had personally experienced homelessness.

---

## Qualitative Data

Among the 148 oral history respondents, 70.3% identified as Black, 10.8% as Hispanic/Latinx, 10.1% as Two or More Races, 2.0% as American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1.4% as Asian, and 0.7% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. In addition, 4.7% identified as “Other” or did not answer. The mean age was 41 ( $M=40.89$ ,  $SD = 14.61$ ). Half identified as women (50.0%), 45.3% as men, 2.7% as Other, and 2.7% unknown. When asked about sexual orientation, 70.9% of participants identified as straight, 8.8% as gay or lesbian, 8.8% as bisexual, and 8.8% as something else (e.g., “queer,” “no label”) or 3.4% unknown/did not respond.

Interpretation of qualitative data focused on pathways into homelessness and barriers to exiting homelessness. Five major themes emerged: 1) economic mobility, 2) housing, 3) criminal justice, 4) behavioral health, and (5) family stabilization.

## Economic Mobility

One feature of respondents’ discussions of their pathways into homelessness is the social dimension of their experiences. People did not become homeless simply through a lack of financial resources; they came to experience homelessness as a result of fragile social networks. The fragility of these networks is marked by two weak points: lack of financial capital and lack of emotional support.

One important pattern that emerged in many of the oral histories: people are not unwilling to double up, take people in, or live in another person’s home—but they do not have the capacity to accommodate the additional consumption of resources (e.g., food and household goods). That, in turn, strains relationships. The SPARC team has begun to describe this phenomenon as *network impoverishment*—a phenomenon in which it is not just the individual or family who is experiencing poverty; the network itself functions in an impoverished state. As one respondent described:

**Respondent:** Before that, me and my two kids and their father was living inside his mother’s house, which she owns the house, but she just gave it up so it was a vacant house...

**Interviewer:** Okay, so she owned it, but she just wasn’t there?

**Respondent:** Yeah, like she owned it, and then she wasn’t like able to take care of it how she used to, and like things started getting cut off slowly like the water, the gas, electricity, and started having no food, and then like she left, and then we didn’t have nowhere to go so we just stayed, and then after that it started to get cold outside, so we are just like let’s just go to the shelter.

## Housing

In the housing domain, two prominent findings emerged: 1) housing options were often viewed as dangerous or unsuitable for habitation, so respondents would “choose”<sup>§</sup> to leave them, and 2) housing placements associated with service programs were commonly too expensive to maintain without ongoing subsidies. For example, one respondent had this to say:

---

§ The SPARC team does not recognize a forced choice as a meaningful choice.

**Interviewer:** What kept bringing you back? What kept causing you to become homeless?

**Respondent:** Either the apartments I moved in weren't well maintained, too high in rent. Extremely too high in rent, should I say. Just like I said, housing. It's just awful. There was no way of like the good housing, you had to, at that time, you had to meet a certain standard, or criteria, whatever you call it...The housing that is offered is in bad areas and a lot of people relapse like that. Or, they don't feel safe.

This respondent repeatedly exited the homeless system successfully but continued to return—returns that were to some degree driven by *where* they end up upon exit.

Additionally, the qualitative findings indicate that housing costs remain a substantial driver of housing instability and the subsequent experience of homelessness. In fact, in a number of instances people who were attempting to exit homelessness indicated that they were being placed back into a situation of housing instability.

## Criminal Justice

Criminal justice involvement was commonly referred to as a primary driver of homelessness and a barrier to accessing housing. As one respondent stated:

I had, for my homelessness situation, I had got a [Redacted] Housing voucher that helps you go out and you find a place, try to find a place to live and you know it's low income. Well, that didn't work for me... they won't rent you a place to live because you have a felony on your background. So for me, I wasn't able to use that voucher because every place that I went to turned me down because of the one felony that I have, which I went to prison for, on my record.

Criminal justice involvement also presented challenges to employment. In their narratives, respondents' inability to secure stable, living-wage jobs was commonly ascribed to prior involvement with the criminal justice system or felony status, rather than lack of skills or the unavailability of jobs. As one respondent highlighted:

And then you come out, you're not trusted now. You can't even be no fireman, you can't work in no factory. Wait a minute, I did all this work for 13 cents an hour in the pen. You know,

doing mattress factories, furniture factories, all of these state buildings that got furniture, we put them together. You do laundry, laundry for mental hospital, for other institutions, and you know, license plates and press license plates and detergent plants. All this stuff that they call you qualified and train you to do, and you get out here they won't hire us. For the real money. So and then they scare the public they believe that everybody that comes out of prison shouldn't be able to get a job.

**"Network impoverishment is a phenomenon in which it is not just that the respondents that are experiencing poverty; the network itself functions in an impoverished state."**

## Behavioral Health

The interviews and focus groups featured descriptions of complex needs around mental health and substance use. The narratives suggest that current interventions are not appropriately responsive to the needs of people of color. One respondent said:

I was at the [redacted] program for mental health, because I'm bipolar and I have post-traumatic stress, but then they're supposed to help you find housing, like going to a co-op... but then at the last day, they didn't do the co-op because they said that my bipolar symptoms were too high. So then they discharged me to the street. So at 7:00 at night time, and then I end up having to leave all my stuff there and then go out on the street.

Narratives similar to this were common, highlighting several problems. The first is that the program or intervention length may be inappropriate for the people in need of assistance. If respondents are being routinely discharged back into homelessness, it suggests that the length of stay may not be adequate to achieve desired outcomes and that behavioral health care providers may not be coordinating well with homeless services. Qualitative data from the interviews may also point to the possibility that interventions being used might not be as effective in populations affected by minority stress.<sup>1</sup>

The interviews also revealed significant substance use issues and a dynamic interplay between personal/interpersonal trauma and substance use disorders. Narratives often involved violence, death, or other traumatic events followed by the onset of substance use.

### Family Stabilization


In describing pathways into homelessness and barriers to exit, respondents repeatedly described family disintegration. These narratives were commonly organized around systems

involvement, with child welfare, juvenile justice, and criminal justice featuring prominently. Another life event that often triggered or complicated system involvement was early pregnancy:

I got pregnant and...my mom and step-dad had a divorce. My mom she decided to go to a shelter because she don't want to live with him no more. My daughter's grandmother on baby dad side didn't want me living with my mom while I was in the shelter because I was about to burst. So I went to go live with them, our relationship started turning bad a little bit of domestic violence was in there, his mom— she didn't condone it but she didn't stop it. And it just was really unhealthy there so one day I decided to go to [Redacted program name] and that's how I ended up here.

This demonstrates another significant theme in respondents' histories: the prevalence of domestic violence. Domestic and intimate partner violence (DV/IPV) was a common thread in the lives of many respondents, across genders and age ranges. The abuse described ranged from extreme levels of physical violence to emotional abuse and isolation.

<sup>1</sup> Minority stress refers to the chronic stress that members of minority groups are subjected to, due to their experiences of stigmatization, discrimination, oppression, and violence.



**"Domestic and intimate partner violence (DV/IPV) was a common thread in the lives of many respondents, across genders and age ranges."**

## Discussion

This study is, to our knowledge, the largest mixed methods study ever conducted on race and homelessness. As such, the research offers rich information regarding the extent of racial disproportionality in the homeless population, as well as insights that can help shape a comprehensive response to these racial inequities.

### Composition of the Homeless Population

This study confirms the dramatic over-representation of specific racial and ethnic groups in the homeless population. Specifically, Black and Native Americans are the most disproportionately affected in SPARC partner communities. Contrary to common perceptions about the connection between poverty and homelessness, **poverty alone does not explain such disproportionality**: the percentage of people of color experiencing homelessness far outpaces their proportion of those living in deep poverty (i.e., <50% of the Federal Poverty Level).

Interestingly, racial disproportionality differed across household status/age range. Rates of Black people experiencing homelessness were highest among young adults ages 18-24 (78% of that group were Black), followed by single adults (67.6% Black) and families (56.3% Black). The percentage of individuals who were Black is significantly higher than has been previously reported,<sup>4</sup> which may be unique to the communities in which the study was sited. Black families homeless in SPARC communities roughly reflected numbers reported nationally.<sup>4</sup> The high number of youth far exceeds that reported by HUD,<sup>4</sup> but is very similar to recent research from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago on the scope of youth homelessness, which found that Black youth had an 83% higher risk of experiencing homelessness compared to youth of other races.<sup>6</sup>

The problem of homelessness among Hispanic/Latinx people remains poorly understood. This study found, as have many previous studies, underrepresentation of Hispanic/Latinx people in the HMIS system. This does not mean, though, that Hispanic/Latinx people are not experiencing homelessness at high rates, only that they

## Among people experiencing homelessness in SPARC communities

**82.6%** of young adults ages 18-24

**73.1%** of single adults 25+

**70.3%** of family members

are people of color.\*



\* Percentages do not include individuals who identified as White and Hispanic/Latinx.

are not being served by the formal shelter, housing, and service systems. One study in Los Angeles County found that homelessness rates for Mexican-born people in Los Angeles were seven times higher than all other races and ethnicities in the county.<sup>8</sup> More research is needed to understand the extent of Latinx homelessness and design interventions to address it explicitly.

The first phase of SPARC research documented racial disproportionality in the homeless population across all SPARC communities, regardless of the community's size or geographical location. This suggests that the problem is not limited to one area of the country and is not isolated in the largest urban centers.

**"The racial demographics of the homeless services workforce do not reflect the diversity of people served, particularly at the senior management level."**

In terms of exit from HMIS, American Indians and Alaska Natives were 48% more likely than Whites to exit from HMIS programs back into homelessness. Additional research is needed to explore why these differences exist. Interestingly, there was no racial difference between Black and White people among those who exited into homelessness. Furthermore, no statistically significant difference existed regarding race as a factor in who exits homelessness into permanent housing (with

or without a subsidy). Despite this, rates of homelessness remain high for Black people, raising questions about the stability of housing placements once they occur, as well as the inadequate number of housing vouchers and available units overall.

## Workforce

The workforce survey showed that the **racial demographics of the homeless services workforce do not reflect the diversity of people served, particularly at the senior management level.** The impact on quality of service and outcomes is unclear. Studies examining the impact of provider race on client outcomes are limited and have focused on mental health treatment and child welfare—not homeless services.<sup>10,11</sup> However, our qualitative interviews and focus groups unearthed perceptions of racial bias in homeless service agencies.

A strategy of growing leaders of color and building diversity in senior leadership and boards of directors is one concrete way to begin addressing such bias. While leadership by people of color does not automatically translate into equitably designed programs, it is one important strategy in the sustained work of dismantling institutional racism.

## Factors Impacting People of Color Experiencing Homelessness

While some of the themes that emerged in the oral histories and focus groups might impact anyone experiencing homelessness regardless of race, these were the stories told by people of color. By isolating people of color in the study design, the findings are inherently racialized. While it may be tempting to say, "What do these findings have to do with race?" it is critical to hold up the voices of the respondents themselves and to remember that their experiences should be understood in the context of the racial inequities that lead to and exacerbate homelessness broadly. In other words, since homelessness has been shown to impact people of color so dramatically, it is impossible to separate their experiences of homelessness from their experiences of bias and discrimination. The qualitative analysis is attempting to shed light on this inextricable connection so that it can be better understood.

Major themes emerged in the qualitative data that begin to prioritize points of intervention. The research yielded





significant insight into economic mobility, housing, criminal justice, behavioral health, and family stabilization. However, these areas do not encompass all of the structural and individual issues facing people of color experiencing homelessness, but they do frame the broad challenges people face.

In terms of **economic mobility**, perhaps the most critical issue to understand and address is that of **network impoverishment**. This concept has emerged in the SPARC interviews as pervasive among people of color experiencing (and at risk of) homelessness. While more research is needed to understand the phenomenon more fully, it is clear that sustained economic investment in communities of color is needed to counter centuries of being shut out of opportunities for wealth accumulation. The findings suggest community-based upstream interventions could help stabilize fragile networks. These might include targeted subsidies or flexible emergency funding that can be applied to prevent homelessness or help people exit homelessness. However, such approaches would not address the long-term needs of the community regarding livable wages and sustainable avenues

of income. Without focus on structural and economic solutions, people of color will continue to live on the edge and housing alone will not solve homelessness.

Access to **safe, decent, and affordable housing** remains a central issue. Respondents revealed a persistent pattern of dangerous, unsuitable housing “choices” and lack of housing affordability across all SPARC communities. This suggests that in order to end homelessness, a significant hurdle will be not only expanding affordable housing availability (with and without subsidy), but also doing so in a way that creates quality housing options and vibrant communities. Once affordable housing is made available, policies should be introduced to ensure that such units go to the people who are most at risk of becoming homeless (or becoming homeless again)—including people of color.

Involvement in the **criminal justice system**—a system that has inequitably targeted Black, Latinx/Hispanic, LGBTQ, and other historically marginalized communities<sup>12,13,14</sup>—has become a two-way street into and out of



homelessness. In other words, many people exit jail and prison onto the streets and into the shelters, and many people experiencing homelessness are arrested, incarcerated, or on probation/parole. One report found that more than 48,000 individuals exit jail/prison directly into homelessness each year.<sup>15</sup> Such involvement marks people's records, creating barriers to obtaining housing and employment. In the face of this, the homelessness response system has an opportunity to address inequity through upstream system changes, such as modification to the policies govern-

ing vouchers, affordable housing, or the permissible scope of landlord background checks.

**Racial disparities in behavioral health** have been well-documented, including high rates of over-diagnosis or misdiagnosis of mental health issues, and service systems that were not designed to meet the needs of people of color.<sup>16</sup> While other studies have highlighted that most behavioral health interventions are normed on White, middleclass populations,<sup>17</sup> the SPARC interviews and focus groups suggested the impact this difference may have on how people experience care. The emerging themes from this study indicate that more research is necessary to better understand what adaptations or new interventions might be needed to address the complex behavioral health needs of people of color experiencing homelessness. Such interventions must be equipped to address minority stress, multigenerational trauma and violence, and substance use.

To solve homelessness for communities of color, **family stabilization strategies** should be considered, including those that address child welfare reform. This points again to a potential upstream intervention site. Further, homeless service programs should be equipped to understand and respond to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs),<sup>18</sup> which impact people of color experiencing homelessness at extremely high rates. This is an issue that requires further attention and research.

**Because of the complex underlying issues that drive high rates of homelessness among people of color, it is important to address multiple levels simultaneously. It is not possible to solve these issues at the programmatic level alone.**

# Recommendations

**B**ased on the quantitative and qualitative findings presented in this report, various strategies can guide organizational leaders, researchers, policy makers, and community members as they work to address racial inequity in homelessness. Because of the complex underlying issues that drive high rates of homelessness among people of color, it is important to address multiple levels simultaneously. It is not possible to solve these issues at the programmatic level alone.

The recommendations presented here are ambitious and structural in nature to respond to the underlying systemic inequities that have for decades put people of color at greater risk for experiencing homelessness. Some of the recommendations are immediate and others are much longer term. Some are local, some are national. The authors fully recognize that policy makers and the general public may not fully embrace these recommendations at present and that much work will need to be done to move them all forward.

## Organizational Change

At the organizational/agency level, leaders and line staff can champion racial equity. Strategies include:

- Train all staff working in the homeless services sector on understanding racism and the intersection of racism and homelessness, so they can target resources toward and develop/adapt programs for people of color.
- Establish professional development opportunities to identify and invest in emerging leaders of color in the homelessness sector.
- Create positions in organizations that are explicitly focused on and charged with creating equity-based responses to homelessness.
- Create greater racial and ethnic diversity on boards of directors for local and national non-profit organizations working on homelessness.
- Ensure involvement in community efforts such as SPARC and similar local and national projects designed to remediate racial inequity.
- Develop or adapt behavioral health interventions, domestic violence programs, and other supportive services for people of color experiencing homelessness.

## Research

The research and evaluation community working in the homelessness sector should embed an awareness of racial inequity into all of its work. Researchers should work to ensure they are not merely extracting knowledge from communities of color, but rather working in partnership with historically marginalized groups to establish new insights. Specifically, next steps in research on homelessness and race might include:

- Conduct additional research to understand the scope of Hispanic/Latinx homelessness and the needs of Hispanic/Latinx people experiencing homelessness.
- Conduct additional research to understand the needs of transgender and gender-expansive individuals.
- Support research in these areas that is grounded in a community-based participatory research (CBPR) model.
- Conduct expanded qualitative data collection to better understand the complicated dynamics that drive inflow and outflow for people of color in the homeless services system.

## Policy

From a policy standpoint, solutions must be systemic, ambitious, and sustained. Such solutions require focused advocacy to shape political will and public support. They include strategies to:

- Implement and enforce existing fair housing protections with the full force of local, state, and federal government.
- Acknowledge the interstate impact on the U.S. housing market. The federal government should intervene to establish a national housing market that is regulated to keep housing within reach for all Americans.
- Develop new affordable housing stock through broader use of inclusionary zoning and mandatory affordable units for new developments.
- Regulate evictions more closely. All individuals facing eviction in housing court should have appropriate representation. Additionally, Congress should pass a national eviction protections law.
- Introduce regulation or legislation to prevent speculators from conducting mass evictions or choosing not to renew leases of tenants.

# Individual Action

**Educate yourself,** your organization, and the wider community on interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism and the facts about race and homelessness.

**Use the data** emerging from SPARC to shape advocacy and public awareness strategies at the organizational and community levels.

**Get involved** with organizational and community-wide efforts to address homelessness through a racial equity perspective.

**Continue to be a voice** for change in your community.

- Enact national tenants' rights legislation.
- Re-introduce rent control into large urban markets.
- Enact criminal justice system reform to reduce felony-related barriers to housing and employment by limiting the scope of background checks, sealing the records of non-violent offenders, and changing eligibility policies for housing subsidies.
- Restructure the relationship between property value and funding for public works, including education, so that the opportunity for advancement in society is not tethered to neighborhood value.
- Reform the child welfare system so that it no longer produces disproportionately negative outcomes for children of color—specifically focusing on family reunification.
- Enact immigration policies that increase the likelihood of engagement of Hispanic/Latinx people in seeking help.

## Individual Action

As individuals—people experiencing homelessness, direct service providers, or simply engaged community members—it is essential to become agents of change for racial equity in the homelessness arena. In order to do this, it is important to:

- Educate yourself, your organization, and the wider community on interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism and the facts about race and homelessness.
- Use the data emerging from SPARC to shape advocacy and public awareness strategies at the organizational and community levels.
- Get involved with organizational and community-wide efforts to address homelessness through a racial equity perspective.
- Continue to be a voice for change in your community.

## Summary

These recommendations grew out of insights from the people who participated in this study—people of color experiencing homelessness—and they are grounded by the research findings. The SPARC team understands that these are ambitious, sweeping recommendations and that they cannot all be implemented immediately or simultaneously. It is time, though, that the homelessness sector engages in a process of soul-searching at the local level and the national level to determine where to begin. That is the work of SPARC moving forward, and it should be the work of all who are working to end homelessness.

## Conclusion

The homelessness field stands at a crossroads: continue to use color-blind strategies to solve an entrenched social problem that disproportionately impacts people of color, or embrace a racial equity approach to addressing homelessness. At this crossroads, it is critical to understand that racial equity should not simply be another initiative or program that is implemented in the mix with other strategies. Instead, commitment to racial equity must permeate all other tactics and strategies that cities, counties, states, and the nation use to prevent and end homelessness.

The only way to scale equity-based solutions to homelessness is to tackle the systems issues from the beginning. As Patrick McCarthy of the Annie E. Casey Foundation has said, “You need to solve a whole set of system problems to implement them at scale—and a bad system always

trumps a good program.”<sup>19</sup> Unless we as a field address structural racism within housing, homelessness response, criminal justice, child welfare, employment, education, and health care, we will continue to witness high rates of homelessness for people of color. Our responses must be ambitious and focused on dismantling racist structures, systems, and programs. And this must be done “at scale.” According to Larry Kramer of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, “Scale is not a separate question, that’s what it means to solve the problem.”<sup>19</sup>

This report presents the initial findings from SPARC’s first phase of research in six communities across the United States. This is only the beginning of a sustained effort to address racial inequity in homelessness. The picture is stark, but if we listen to the voices of people of color experiencing homelessness, the way forward will become clear.



---

## References

1. Roth, D. (1985). *Homelessness in Ohio: a study of people in need: statewide report*. Ohio Department of Mental Health, Office of Program Evaluation and Research.
2. Jones, M. M. (2016). Does race matter in addressing homelessness? A review of the literature. *World Medical & Health Policy*, 8(2), 139-156.
3. U.S. Census Bureau. (2015). *American Community Survey (ACS)*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>
4. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2017). *The 2016 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress: Part 2—Estimates of Homelessness in the United States*. Retrieved from <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2016-AHAR-Part-2.pdf>.
5. Carter III, G. R. (2011). From exclusion to destitution: race, affordable housing, and homelessness. *Cityscape*, 33-70.
6. Voice of Youth Count. (2017). *Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America—Voices of Youth Count*. Retrieved from <http://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/national-estimates-of-youth-homelessness/>
7. Culhane, D. P., & Metraux, S. (1999). Assessing relative risk for homeless shelter usage in New York City and Philadelphia. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 18(3), 219-236.
8. Conroy, S. J., & Heer, D. M. (2003). Hidden Hispanic homelessness in Los Angeles: The “Latino paradox” revisited. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 25(4), 530-538.
9. U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *American FactFinder*. Retrieved from <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>
10. Chinman, M. J., Rosenheck, R. A., & Lam, J. A. (2000). Client-case manager racial matching in a program for homeless persons with serious mental illness. *Psychiatric services*, 51(10), 1265-1272.
11. McBeath, B., Chuang, E., Bunker, A., & Blakeslee, J. (2014). Under what conditions does caseworker-caregiver racial/ethnic similarity matter for housing service provision? An application of representative bureaucracy theory. *Social Service Review*, 88(1), 134-165.
12. Sampson, R., & Lauritsen, J. (1997). Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Crime and Criminal Justice in the United States. *Crime and Justice*, 21, 311-374. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1147634>
13. Mogul, J. L., Ritchie, A. J., & Whitlock, K. (2011). *Queer (in)justice: the criminalization of LGBT people in the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, [2011].
14. Alexander, M., & West, C. (2012). *The new Jim Crow: mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York: New Press, 2012.
15. U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. (2017, August 4). *Criminal Justice Reform*. Retrieved from <https://www.usich.gov/solutions/criminal-justice>
16. Compton, M. T., & Shim, R. S. (2015). *The social determinants of mental health*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, a division of American Psychiatric Association, [2015].
17. *Mental health: culture, race, and ethnicity: a supplement to Mental health: a report of the Surgeon General*. (2001). Rockville, Md.: Department of Health and Human Services, U. S. Public Health Service, [2001].
18. Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., ... & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 14(4), 245-258.
19. Kramer, M. (2017, April 11). Systems Change in a Polarized Country. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/systems\\_change\\_in\\_a\\_polarized\\_country](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/systems_change_in_a_polarized_country)



SPARC

[center4si.com/sparc](http://center4si.com/sparc)