Washtenaw County Continuum of Care

2019 HUD CoC Funding Competition
Racial Disparity Assessment Summary

Question 1: Are people of different races or ethnicities more or less likely to receive homeless assistance?

To answer this question, data from HMIS indicating who received services was compared to Census data about the general population in Washtenaw County.

Findings

1. **Individuals and families identifying as Black or African American continue to be overrepresented in homeless assistance compared to the general Washtenaw County population.**

In line with findings from previous years, households identifying as Black or African American continue to be overrepresented, making up 61% of all persons served by Washtenaw County Continuum of Care (CoC) in calendar year 2018, despite making up only 12% of the general Washtenaw County population. This overrepresentation persists even in comparison to the county population living below the poverty line, or those experiencing deep poverty, with income below 50% of the poverty line.
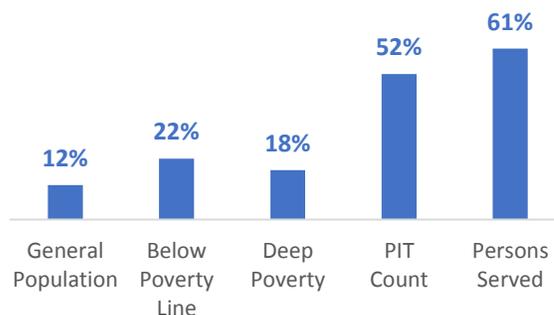

Figure 1. Persons identifying as Black or African American as share of population

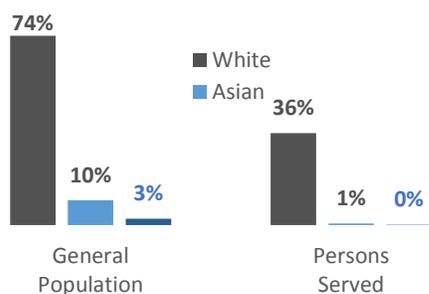2. **All other races are underrepresented in homeless assistance**

Figure 2. White, Asian, and Multiple Race persons as share of population

All other races sought assistance at a lower rate than their share of the county population.

White households account for 74% of the general population, but little more than a third of households who are accessing homeless assistance. People identifying as Asian or as multiple races are present in significant numbers in the overall population, but combined represent less than 1% of homeless assistance. American Indian/Alaska Native and Hawaiian Native or Pacific islanders make up less than 1% of the county population and those receiving assistance.
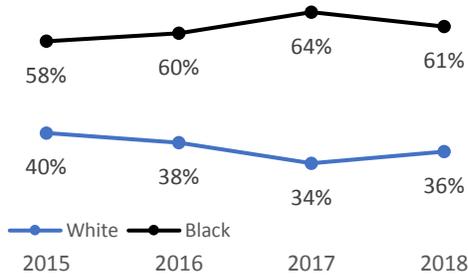
Figure 3. Share of White and Black households receiving homelessness assistance over time

3. The share of Black or African American households receiving assistance varies from year to year.

Even though the overrepresentation of Black or African American households continues, the size of the disparity shows considerable variation from year to year. Since 2015, this percentage has fluctuated between 58% and 64%, with similar shifts seen among households identifying as White. There is a slight trend towards increased overrepresentation for households identifying as Black or African American in later years, which may point towards increasing disparity over time.

4. People of Latinx or Hispanic ethnicity access homelessness assistance at similar rates to their presence in the general population.

While information around ethnicity is limited due to underreporting and the deterring impact of negative immigration enforcement, the available data suggest that people identifying as Latinx/Hispanic are accessing homelessness assistance at a rate similar to their share of the county population. Latinx/Hispanic persons made up 4.8% of Washtenaw County in 2018, and 5.6% of people receiving homelessness assistance. While the share receiving services is still proximate to the general population, it is also a sizeable increase of 33% from the 2017 share of 4.1%.

5. Racial disparities are much larger among families with at least one adult and one child compared to adult only households.

Racial disparities are much starker among families with at least one adult and one child, where 73% of persons served identify as Black or African American. While the share of Black or African American individual households is actually lower than the share of white individual households, there is still a sizeable disparity when compared to the general population, where 12% of county residents identify as Black or African American.
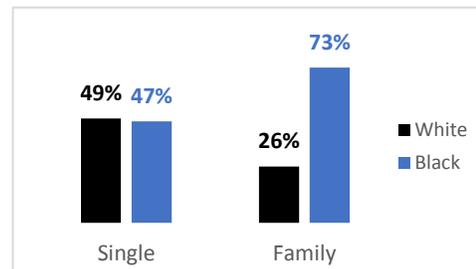

Figure 4. Racial disparities among families and adult only households

Question 2: Are people of different races or ethnicities more or less likely to receive a positive outcome from homeless assistance.

To answer this question, two key outcome measures were considered:
- **Positive Discharge Destination Rate** measures the percentage of project leavers who exit to permanent or stable housing.
- **Length of Time** indicates how long clients participated in programs, and is used to see if people of different races and ethnicities are engaged in programs for similar durations.

Data for ethnicity was not available in the outcome reports used to answer this question. While the CoC is exploring how to better measure outcomes by ethnicity, the following analysis only considers race.

Findings

1. **Individuals and families identifying as Black or African American exit to positive destinations at higher rates than White individuals and families.**

As has been seen in previous year, households identifying as Black or African American exited to permanent housing from CoC programs at a much higher rate than households identifying as White. This trend has been true since at least 2015, and the gap in outcomes seems to be widening.

This trend could benefit from further study. In particular, there is a large difference in racial disparity between families with children and single adult households, and those groups also have a different mix of permanent hosuing resources available to them. These two factors may be driving much of the disparity in housing outcomes.
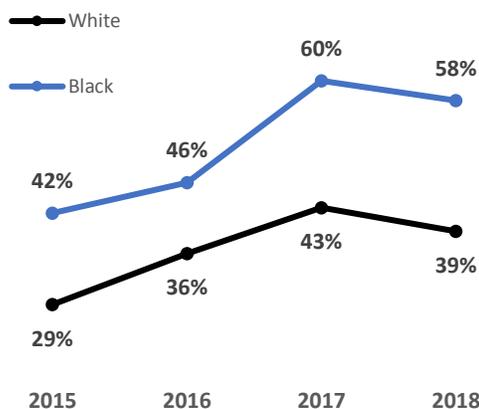
Figure 5. Share of exits to positive destinations by year

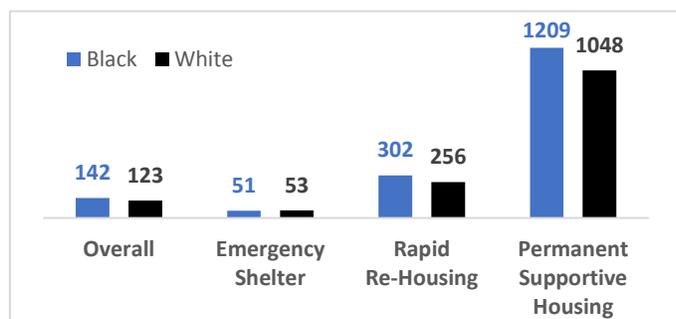2. **Black and White households have equivalent lengths of stay in different project types**

Figure 6. Length of stay by race and project type

Black and White households showed a largely similar length of stay, which is one indicator that can help understand the manner in which clients engage with a project, as well as measure the level of acuity and need among clients served. Overall, Black or African American households are engaged in a project for 142 days before exit, compared to 123 for White households.

While similar lengths of stay can be observed across multiple project types, there does seem to be a slight trend towards longer program engagement for Black or African American households in permanent housing projects, which include Rapid Re-Housing and Permanent Supportive Housing. This trend has been observed in previous years, and should be monitored closely. Qualitative input from clients served could help to illustrate what the differences in length of stay mean for client experience and outcomes.

3. **Small sample sizes for all other races make it difficult to determine if they are more or less likely to receive a positive outcome.**

Only 92 out of 3,294 clients who exited a homeless assistance program in 2018 identified as a race other than White or Black or African American. Because the share of other races is so small, it is difficult to observe significant differences in outcomes for these races, and any such observations would lack power.

Recommended Strategies to Address Disparities

In light of the above findings, the steps below are recommended to address the overrepresentation of Black or African American persons among those accessing homelessness assistance.

1. **Conduct further research into racial disparity among the populations served** using both data and qualitative feedback from clients. Conduct focus groups among clients served, particularly persons of color who identify as Black or African American, to better understand the experiences that led to homelessness and their experience of working with our system. Continue to utilize data to illustrate the scale and scope of racial disparity by working in tandem with our state HMIS partners to develop more comprehensive reporting tools to dive deeper into our community's data, and publicly report on our findings and how we are addressing racial disparity.

2. **Continue current strategies** including inclusive communications and marketing materials, annual trainings around the intersection of race and homelessness, using a racial equity lens in committees and in policy discussions, and participating in national efforts to understand and reduce racial disparity, such as our participation in a 2018 Built for Zero research project on racial disparity. Washtenaw County also completed a 6-month project for Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing that examined the history of segregation and exclusion in Washtenaw County and its impacts on opportunities for residents today. The work identified pockets of concentrated poverty that primarily impacts communities of color and culminated in the 2017 Assessment of Fair Housing Plan that commits to investing in these communities based on community priorities. More information can be found at https://www.washtenaw.org/724/Affirmatively-Furthering-Fair-Housing-AF

3. **Develop CoC leadership that is representative of the population served,** by considering racial equity when hiring at the CoC Lead, when recruiting for CoC Board or Committee positions, and by encouraging CoC service providers to consider equity when making hiring decisions (to ask the question: "to what extent are their decisions hindering or advancing racial equity for the population that they serve?"). Further develop leadership by identifying and supporting emerging leaders of color though professional development and mentoring.

4. **Implement a CoC Equity Policy** that builds off the 2018 Washtenaw County Racial Equity Policy (which was unanimously adopted by Washtenaw County's Board of Commissioners). CoC staff will recommend that the CoC Board consider adopting an Equity Policy, in which the CoC declares its focus on issues of equity, particularly racial equity when considering the following (but not limited to) aspects of the CoC: services, policies and procedures, budgeting, training, and community engagement; to spearhead the charge of the policy; and, to address inequities that exist within the populations we serve.

5. **Work in partnership with non-CoC partners and allies** to educate a broad range of entities- from local and state government, law enforcement, mental health, health care, and other partners/stakeholders- about the intersection of racism and homelessness in Washtenaw County, and to work in collaboration to identify and respond to opportunities to reduce racial disparities.

6. **Increase outreach to households identifying as Black or African American** by ensuring that Coordinated Entry is marketed to and accessible by Black or African American households, and encourage service providers to expand outreach and services in neighborhoods and geographic areas with higher concentrations of Black or African American residents. **Washtenaw County will leverage AFFH results and its Washtenaw Opportunity Index to identify and target those neighborhoods that are almost exclusively comprised of individuals and families identifying as Black or African American, where deep disparities exists around various domains, such as health, housing, income, and education.**

Data Sources

Sources from HMIS were used:

- **2019 PIT Count:** Data from the annual census of sheltered and unsheltered persons experiencing literal homelessness conducted each year in January. This data provides a snapshot of who was accessing services or in need of shelter services on a particular night.
- **2018 Annual Count Report:** This report details demographic data from HMIS for all persons who received any services from Washtenaw County CoC in calendar year 2017. This report, provided for the CoC by our statewide HMIS provider, Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness (MCAH), is the only source from HMIS containing information about households imminently at risk of homelessness in addition to data about people experiencing literal homelessness.
- **VI-SPDAT and VI-F-SPDAT Report:** This report contains data for all clients who received a literal homeless assessment in calendar year 2017. The VI-SPDAT and VI-F-SPDAT are used internationally as standardized assessment tools for individuals and families experiencing homelessness to assess both client vulnerability and need as well as what type of assistance would be most appropriate.
- **Clients Served by Project Type:** By looking at racial data from different types of homeless assistance, it can be observed whether people of different races are accessing all types of assistance in similar ways.
- **Discharge Destination:** This summary report details aggregate data about whether clients who left projects exited to housing or other positive destinations, or returned to homelessness.
- **Length of Stay and Returns to Homelessness:** This report measures average length of stay in projects for all clients, as well as the percentage of clients who exit a program but access homelessness assistance again at a later point.

Additionally, data from the US Census Bureau and the American Communities Survey were used to get a sense of the racial makeup of the general population of Washtenaw County, as well as the population living in poverty or deep poverty, with deep poverty understood as having annual income below ½ of the poverty line.

Limitations

Some aspects of the data used made it difficult to obtain a clear picture of how race and ethnicity intersect with homelessness assistance in Washtenaw County.

Census Data Limitations

Census data is limited in several ways. First, race and ethnicity are considered separately, and ethnicity data was not available for the data measuring the population experiencing poverty or deep poverty, making it difficult to estimate the Latinx population in Washtenaw County that is most likely to apply for homeless assistance.

Second, the presence of two major universities within Washtenaw County has a major effect on Census estimates. Census data from 2012 through 2016 indicates that slightly more than 10% of persons counted in Washtenaw County census data are college students living off-campus.[1] College students as a whole have a different racial makeup than the general county population, but are less likely to need or

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[1] "Examining the Effects of Off-Campus College Students on Poverty Rates."
https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/12/off-campus.html

access homeless services[2], which likely causes the census data used as a reference in this analysis to be skewed towards college student demographics. Specifically, the census data probably reflects a higher Asian population and lower Black or African American population than would be observed if college students were omitted from the data. This is especially true for statistics around poverty, as college students frequently have little to no income.

HMIS Data Limitations

Similar to limitations already described, HMIS data use in this analysis was limited by the reporting tools available. While several demographic and outcomes reports do report on race and ethnicity, the data is typically summarized at a high level and does not include data tables, preventing deeper analysis on race or ethnicity. Being able to refine or further filter data by race in HMIS would allow for far more detailed and actionable analysis. Data and visualization tools currently under development by our HMIS vendor should allow for such analysis in the near future.

Like the Census data, HMIS data also reports on race and ethnicity separately. Ethnicity data is not consistently available across all reports used, further limiting the ability to consider ethnic disparity.

Level of Analysis

The present analysis focused on overall system demographics, with some limited data available for certain project types. Future analysis could be improved by expanding the project types considered, or by looking at demographics and outcomes for individual projects.

Finally, this analysis did not consider how race intersects with gender, household composition, or other demographic factors. Because race intersects with these factors groups in different ways, multiple strategies may be required to reduce disparity across all these populations. Further research could help understand the impact of race on specific groups within the population receiving homelessness assistance.

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[2] University of Michigan Student Profile https://admissions.umich.edu/apply/freshmen-applicants/student-profile