

A Brief Timeline of Race and Homelessness in America

by Jeff Olivet, Amanda Andere, Marc Dones, Brittani Manzo, and Jessica Venegas

Revised March 2019

People of color have long been disproportionately represented among those experiencing homeless in the United States. Yet our collective response to high rates of homelessness among people of color has been slow to develop. In recent years, an increasing focus on racial equity has begun to permeate local and national organizations focused on preventing and ending homelessness—a promising step in recognizing that structural racism drives homeless in America.

This brief timeline lays out the history of the connections between race and homelessness in the United States and is intended to inform the work ahead in pursuit of racial equity.

1607-1776	Colonists steal land by force from native people and force them to leave ancestral homelands, killing tens of thousands of indigenous people and spreading deadly diseases.
1619	Twenty slaves are stolen from their homes in West Africa and brought to the English settlement at Jamestown, marking the beginning of a trans-Atlantic slave trade that would bring millions more from their homes and families to the land that was being colonized by the British in North America over the next two centuries.
1640s	Earliest cases of homelessness are documented in the American colonies.
1670s	English colonists and native people become homeless during “King Philip’s War” in New England, which was the last major effort by indigenous people to expel English settlers.
1734	The first poor house in the colonies opens in New York City, just outside the city wall, where Wall Street now stands. Boston and Philadelphia soon follow, opening poor houses of their own. Boston’s is on an island in Boston Harbor, which for nearly three centuries housed homeless shelters and mental health/substance use institutions. These poor houses served as jails, homeless shelters, almshouses, and as de facto mental institutions.
1804	The Louisiana Purchase doubles the size of the newly formed United States of America, expediting the expansion of slavery south and west, as well as the ongoing theft and massacres of Native lands and people.
1820s	The industrial revolution and rise of the American city bring massive numbers of people to growing cities in the Northeast. Many become homeless, wandering the streets looking for work. Cities respond by creating laws banning loitering and panhandling. Newly-formed police departments routinely round people up at the end of the day and lock them in jail cells overnight. Among those experiencing urban homelessness are free Blacks and runaway slaves.
1830	President Andrew Jackson signs the Indian Removal Act, displacing tens of thousands of Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole and other native people who suffered from deadly disease, starvation, and exhaustion as they migrated west. This is the first major federal legislation to create mass homelessness.
1863	After the Emancipation Proclamation, free Blacks experience homelessness on the edges of Union Army Camps and in Northern cities.
1865-1866	“Black Codes” are enacted in southern states to restrict the rights of African Americans and to force them to work in a labor economy based on low wages and debt.

1865-1877	The Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Reconstruction Act of 1867 shepherd in a short era of “Radical Reconstruction,” where interracial democracy begins to take hold as Blacks are voted into elected offices, ambitious economic development programs and more equitable tax structures are established, and laws against racial discrimination take hold. However, the Ku Klux Klan is established in 1865 and increasing sentiments of white supremacy and white violence come on the heels of Emancipation, precipitating the end of Reconstruction. The reassertion of white supremacy in the South and the official end of Reconstruction in 1877 accelerates the ongoing subjugation of Black people. Sharecropping, peonage, and the convict leasing system replace slavery. Jim Crow laws institute a century of apartheid in America. Lynching becomes commonplace.
1880s	Black “hobos” are among the tens of thousands who “ride the rails” looking for opportunity across a nation that has been recently connected by the transcontinental railroad.
1882	The Chinese Exclusion Act, signed by President Chester Arthur, bans immigration by Chinese laborers and excluded from U.S. citizenship Chinese immigrants who had already settled in the U.S.
1880s-1970s	The Great Migration of Black individuals and families from former slave states in the South to large cities in the Northeast, Midwest, and West coast begins. As they arrive, they are pushed into overcrowded, segregated housing.
1927	The Mississippi River floods, displacing hundreds of thousands of people from Illinois to Louisiana and creating mass homelessness and speeding along the Great Migration. President Herbert Hoover oversees the recovery, which includes segregated camps for Whites and Blacks. Black men, under armed guard, are held captive and forced to rebuild levees in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas.
1918-1968	Institutionalized housing discrimination—restrictive covenants, redlining, Federal Housing Administration and G.I. bill loans, among other national and local policies—result in entrenched housing segregation across America, and the exclusion of people of color from home ownership and nearly eliminate the potential for multigenerational wealth accumulation.
1930s	The Great Depression creates homelessness and unemployment for people of all races and ethnicities in the U.S. on a scale not seen before or since.
1940s	Between 110,000 and 120,000 Japanese-Americans are rounded up—their homes and businesses stolen—and incarcerated in government-run internment camps. In 1988, each surviving victim was paid \$20,000 in reparations.
1968	The Fair Housing Act is passed outlawing housing discrimination. It has, however, never been fully enforced, perpetuating segregation.
1960s-present	Mass incarceration of people of color becomes, in Michelle Alexander’s words, “the New Jim Crow,” creating a two-way pipeline between homelessness and jails/prisons.
1960s-1980s	Deinstitutionalization of people in state mental hospitals and the lack of adequately scaled community-based housing and supports result in homelessness for tens of thousands of people across the United States
1968-present	Ongoing housing discrimination, gentrification, and the disparate impact of local zoning ordinances on communities of color conspire to put people of color—especially Black and Native American people— at higher risk of homelessness than their White counterparts. Aggressive policing in communities of color feeds the system of mass incarceration.
1972-1992	An 80% reduction in federal investments in public housing—coupled with corresponding cuts to other social safety net programs—drives a massive spike in homelessness and lays the groundwork for the contemporary homelessness epidemic. People of color are most dramatically affected by these cuts, putting them at greater risk of homelessness.
1980s-1990s	Research by Kim Hopper, Peter Rossi, Robert Rosenheck, Dennis Culhane, and others documents high rates of homelessness among people of color. One study (Culhane, 1999) of shelter utilization in Philadelphia and New York City shows that Black children under 5 are 29 times more likely than

	<p>their White counterparts to end up in shelters. Peter Rossi documents extremely high rates of homelessness among African Americans, but finds low rates for Latino/a people, exploring the notion of a “Latino Paradox”. This concept, which speculates explanations for low rates of Latino homelessness, has been challenged through subsequent research that show higher rates than previously thought.</p>
2000s	<p>Federal, national, and local initiatives to address homelessness begin to adopt shared frameworks and best practices in preventing to and responding to homelessness, but analysis around the disproportionate impact of housing instability on communities of color is not a central focus and strategies are not tailored to the needs of those communities. Research similarly often overlooks the prevalence of homelessness among people of color.</p> <p>Conroy and Heer, in their article entitled “Hidden Hispanic Homelessness in Los Angeles: The Latino Paradox Revisited,” find that Hispanic/Latino people “may be systematically undercounted in homeless samples because they are more likely to exist outside traditional homeless spaces.”</p> <p>Professor Roberta Ann Johnson of the University of San Francisco publishes “African Americans and Homelessness: Moving Through History,” in which she documents the unique challenges of Black Americans experiencing homelessness.</p>
2010s	<p>Focused work on racism and homelessness begins to coalesce. Jeff Olivet and Marc Dones from the Center for Social Innovation begin giving public talks on racism and homelessness at national and statewide conferences and to distribute blogs and podcasts dedicated to the subject of racial equity and homelessness. In 2016, they spearhead the launch of SPARC (Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities)—a multi-city initiative on race and homelessness.</p> <p>The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty releases a report entitled Racial Discrimination in Housing and Homelessness in the United States: A Report to the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.</p> <p>A White House Briefing on Youth Homelessness includes an emphasis on racial equity, bringing together partners such as A Way Home America, True Colors, and many others. The gathering has strong representation of youth and young adults of color who have experienced homelessness. Soon after, researchers from Chapin Hall publish Voices of Homeless Youth Count, which documents extremely high rates of homelessness among youth of color nationwide.</p> <p>Organizations such as Funders Together to End Homelessness, Community Solutions, the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Future Laboratories, the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, CSH, and others begin to advance the work of centering racial equity in responding to homelessness.</p> <p>Federal agencies such as HUD and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness take steps to focus on racial disparities and disproportionality among people experiencing homelessness. <i>Home, Together: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness</i> asserts that, to be successful, the strategies outlined in the plan must be grounded in data and analysis to “support communities to address the needs of populations that are disproportionately impacted by homelessness in each community.”</p> <p>In February 2018, findings from the SPARC study are published and national and local advocates, funders, and researchers gather in Seattle for the first Summit on Racial Equity and Homelessness.</p> <p>On January 22-23, 2019 a group of national partners gathers in Washington, DC to strategize how to advance a racial equity agenda in the nation’s work to prevent and end homelessness.</p>

This timeline is offered as an overview to highlight key events and activities that have brought us to where we are now. It is clear that people of color are—and have long been—much more likely than white people to be homeless in America. The question now facing us is this:

What do we do about it?