


Homeless Crisis  
Response System

# 2021 Racial Equity Report

Clark County, WA



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# Executive Summary

**H**ousing in the United States is a system that has been founded in inequity. Taking land, refusing ownership, and creating a system that is unattainable to many. We at Council for the Homeless know how this system began and understand the need to remove these barriers today. Having a home is a human right that must be equally accessible to all.

There are many issues that are alive and present within the BIPOC community directly connected to housing insecurity. Childcare, health insurance, and access impact obtaining and sustaining housing. These issues are outside of the scope of the Homeless Crisis Response System, but they are very much related to the subject of housing and homelessness. This is why this Equity Report advocates for programs such as SNAP, child tax credits and more.

Since our inception in 1989, Council for the Homeless has been committed to preventing and ending homelessness in Clark County. Our commitment and passion for that mission continues, though we recognize that it is a mission we alone cannot achieve. It is our honor and privilege to be part of this community, to work alongside each of you to ensure that all of our neighbors, regardless of their income, skin color, or other identities are able to have a safe and secure place to call home. Together, with a targeted approach and a steadfast commitment, we can end homelessness.

# What is Equity?

Ask a long-time resident about the history of Vancouver and Clark County and you are likely to hear stories of strong community work ethic, war time development, and a practice of neighbors helping neighbors.

Many people take pride in the community's history of coming together during challenging times. This is visible in events ranging from the boom of housing development in Vancouver during World War II, supporting community members impacted by the eruption of Mt. Saint Helens, and modern day efforts to respond to the global pandemic. While it is true that people from every corner of Clark County band together to create support for people in need, it is also important to examine who is receiving the assistance and who might be left behind. Are people in need equitably supported?

Council for the Homeless and the Homeless Crisis Response System (HCRS) have a keen understanding of, and commitment to, racial equity. In the context of serving people experiencing homelessness, racial equity is intentionally concentrating efforts to support people with the most barriers to services and the lowest outcomes due to impacts of systemic racism. When services are designed, delivered, and evaluated using a racial equity lens, people benefit because this targeted approach ensures everyone is able to have their unique needs met.

# The Local Case for Centering Racial Equity in Homelessness and Housing Services

## 1. BIPOC Overrepresentation in the HCRS

Housing and homelessness data taken from the Homeless Management Information System show the need for more equitable service delivery.

- In 2021, 35% of all people experiencing homelessness in Clark County at any point over the course of the year identified as Black, Indigenous, or other People of Color (BIPOC.) However, census data indicates that roughly 15% of county residents identify as BIPOC.
- 30% of children under 18 who experienced homelessness in Clark County in 2021 were Black children, 43% were Pacific Islander children, and 17% were White children.
- 20% of seniors aged 55 and over who experienced homelessness in Clark County in 2021 identified as BIPOC and 10% identified as Black.

## DEFINITIONS

**Homeless Crisis Response System (HCRS):** A system mandated by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Washington State Department of Commerce, the goal of which is to identify and connect people experiencing homelessness to housing assistance and other services. Comprised of several service agencies across the Continuum of Care, ranging from schools and hospitals to social service agencies and beyond.

**Homeless Management Information System (HMIS):** A nationwide information technology system and database that is used to collect data to support HCRS utilizers and connect them with service providers.

Council for the Homeless administers HMIS for the HCRS in Clark County.

## 2. Legacy of Racism

Racial disparities in the need for homelessness and housing services did not happen overnight. Historically, housing has not always been as easily accessible or readily available to various groups of people. In the WWII housing boom in Vancouver, the influx of growth was significant. As noted by historian Melissa Williams, the population of Black Vancouverites grew from roughly 18 in 1940 to more than 8,000 in 1944. However, after the war, many of these residents were pressured to move out of the community through the use of unsupportive, covertly racist social attitudes and public policy<sup>1</sup>. Discrimination in financial access, employment, healthcare, and education, as well as higher rates of incarceration and poverty are evidence both locally and nationally of systemic racism.

People who live in Clark County face increasing rental rates and incomes below the Area Median Income (AMI). Clark County is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest county in Washington and growing at a continuously fast pace<sup>2</sup>. The legacy of systemic racism in housing is overlaid on the higher housing costs and stagnant wages. This creates additional barriers and challenges for BIPOC residents.

**Systemic Racism:** Social, organizational or government policies, practices or procedures, expressly written or otherwise, that result in a lack of access to services or support, or provide an unfair advantage to others, based on race.

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1. Williams, M. (2022, January). Vancouver's First Black Families with Melissa Williams. The Historic Trust. Retrieved from <https://www.thehistorictrust.org/first-black-families/>

2. Phiel, S. (2022, June). Clark County's population grows faster than state's, tops out at 520,900. The Columbian. Retrieved from <https://www.columbian.com/news/2022/jun/30/clark-countys-population-grows-faster-than-states-tops-out-at-520900/>



### 3. Who rents their home and who owns their home?

There are multiple factors involved in every individual or family's experience of homelessness. Still, data tells us that people of color in Clark County typically earn less money than white people. Additionally, people of color are more likely to rent their homes and white people are more likely to own their homes. In addition, people of any race who rent their homes are more likely to lose their housing than people of any race who own their homes.

The maps below illustrate where people live, who rents, and who owns their home in Clark County.

Each year, people experiencing homelessness in Clark County are asked for the zip code of their last home. They report zip codes that represent the lowest rates of income, the highest rates of BIPOC residents, and the highest rates of renters.



lower median household income      higher median household income



higher proportion of people of color      lower proportion of people of color



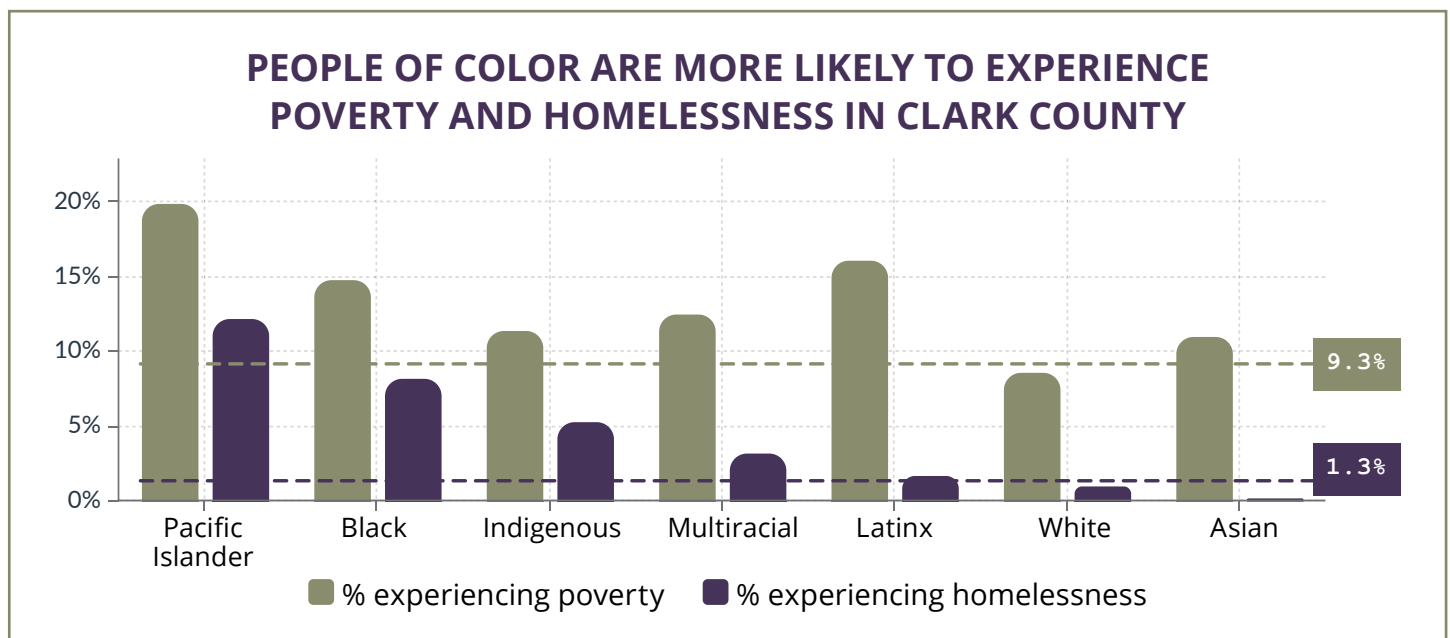
higher proportion of renting households      lower proportion of renting households



more people experiencing homelessness previously living here      fewer people experiencing homelessness previously living here

#### 4. Implications of the links between homelessness, race, poverty, and renting

The Homeless Crisis Response System provides support to individuals and families once they become unhoused. In addition, rental assistance to prevent homelessness became a major function of the HCRS during the pandemic. Data in the chart below illustrate the relationship between poverty and homelessness, as well as poverty, systemic racism and homelessness. This data illustrates that people in Clark County who are BIPOC are more likely to experience higher rates of poverty, as well as higher rates of homelessness compared with White people in Clark County.



According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition 2022 Out of Reach Report, a single worker earning minimum wage (increasing from \$14.49/hr. to \$15.74/hr. January 2023) in Clark County would need to work 75 hours per week to afford a zero-bedroom apartment at Fair Market Rate in Clark County. Even for those working better paying jobs, housing continues to be out of reach in Clark County. The area median income (AMI) for Clark County is over \$106,000/year and the estimated median renter household income is \$57,082/year. This indicates a

**Area Median Income (AMI):** The midpoint of a region’s income distribution, calculated on annually by HUD.

**Fair Market Rent:** Fair Market Rent is calculated by HUD, as the 40th percentile of gross rents for a local housing market (market area are established by HUD, and Vancouver is part of the Portland – Vancouver – Hillsboro region).



large income disparity between people who have the means to own a home and people who rent. Within the City of Vancouver, where most of Clark County's renters live, nearly 40% of people who rent their homes are rent burdened, and more than 20% of renters over all are severely rent burdened<sup>3</sup>.

Solutions to homelessness intersect with solutions to poverty. People need stable housing to end their poverty and ending poverty is often needed to maintain stable housing. Increasing the child tax credit, a guaranteed basic income, increasing minimum wage to a livable wage, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are examples of policies and programs shown to decrease poverty levels and increase housing stability.

**Rent Burdened:** A household that is paying more than 30% of their net income toward housing is considered rent burdened.

**Severely Rent Burdened:** A household paying more than 50% of their income is considered severely rent burdened.

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3. Wilkerson, M. (2022, March). Vancouver City Council Work Session, Housing Affordability and Availability in Vancouver: A Policy Framework. Retrieved from: <https://invintus-client-documents.s3.amazonaws.com/2917038973/0abf153c6e96105e769fb72b2e3ee2b3a9f414a7.pdf>

# The Homeless Crisis Response System: Access to Services

**T**he HCRS must determine how to disperse its limited resources and operate in the most humane and effective way. It uses a vulnerability assessment tool to determine who is in most need of homelessness and housing services. The higher one's vulnerability score, the higher one is prioritized for services.

Beginning in 2013, local providers used a nationally recognized Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Data Tool (VI-SPDAT). In 2018, local providers analyzed data and determined the priority ranking was skewing in favor of white participants within the system. Upon this analysis, the Coordinated Assessment Workgroup revised the existing tool and developed the Clark County Assessment Tool (CCAT) with intentionality in decreasing scoring disparities based on racial and ethnic identities. Since then, racial disparities between scores are decreasing, indicating vulnerabilities are being more accurately identified.

# The Homeless Crisis Response System: Program Placement

After accessing the HCRS and completing a CCAT, people may wait weeks or even months to access a housing assistance program that will help them stabilize in a new home. Factors that influence the length of wait time include:

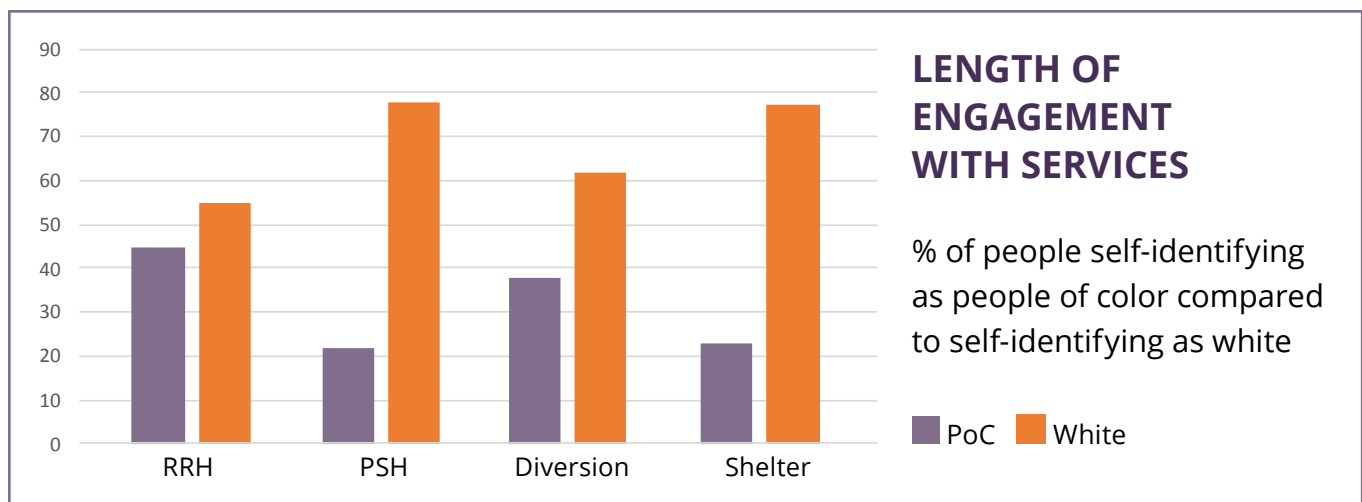
- **Low rental vacancy rates:** rental vacancy rates hover around 2% in Vancouver. There are very few affordable rental units for the number of people needing to rent.
- **Agency workforce shortages:** In the wake of COVID-19, most agencies within the HCRS were severely understaffed in 2021
- **Availability of services:** The need for homelessness and housing services outweighs the resources.

When people are in a housing program (Emergency Shelter, Diversion, Rapid Rehousing, Permanent Supportive Housing), the greater their engagement with staff and elements of the program, the greater their chance of securing and maintain stable housing. In 2021, data shows that white individuals and families continue to engage in programming longer than individuals and families of color.

## Emergency Shelter:

Emergency shelter provides short-term temporary shelter (lodging) for those experiencing homelessness. Emergency Shelters can be facility-based, or hotel/motel voucher.

**Diversion:** When people seek emergency shelter or housing assistance, a diversion strategy can help them find an alternative stable housing situation quickly and avoid the person entering the homeless system. Diversion is typically a good fit for people experiencing homelessness but have low barriers to housing. Their homelessness is less complicated to resolve versus someone who has been without a home repeatedly or for a long time.



# Calls to Action

**D**uring 2022, Council for the Homeless surveyed approximately 200 BIPOC community members who had been impacted by homelessness and housing instability. The function of these surveys was to support the development of the forthcoming Clark County Homeless Crisis Response System Homeless Action Plan, but some of the findings are applicable to this report as well. Surveys were conducted electronically, on paper, and through focus group, with an emphasis placed on collecting data from racial and ethnic groups who are most underserved in our system (Black, Latinx, Chuukese, Indigenous).

The messaging from community was clear: regardless of racial or ethnic background, participants reported very similar barriers to care, and offered similar suggestions for improvement. The findings from these surveys are powerful, and constitute calls to action for an equitable Homeless Crisis Response System:

## **Increase assistance access points**

- Currently, the Housing Hotline is available to assist people during the following hours: M-F 9am-8pm and weekends and holidays from 11am-5pm. While the hours of operation are expanded beyond the traditional work day, they are still limited enough to present barriers to many folks. People who are working full time and caring for children or other family members may find it difficult to call the hotline during these hours.
- The Housing Hotline only offers real-time services in English and Spanish. For community members speaking other languages, a third-party service must be accessed, increasing wait times, and decreasing direct communication.

**Rapid Rehousing:** is an intervention designed to help individuals and families through short term rental assistance and supportive services. RRH services are typically less than 24 months in duration with the goal of helping households achieve stability and exit to permanent housing in the shortest timeframe possible. Households served must meet the HUD definition of literally homeless. Rapid re-housing assistance is offered without preconditions (such as employment, income, absence of criminal record, or sobriety) and the resources and services provided tailor to the unique needs of the household. Services to support rapid re-housing include housing search and landlord negotiation, financial and rental assistance, and the delivery of home and agency based housing stabilization services, as needed. Caseload maximum per FTE is 30 households, programs are encouraged to meet caseload size of 20 per FTE.

*Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness*