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Black History Month

February is Black history month and as our way of acknowledging this month, I've added a excellent informational document from the Homeless Hub website. Please read and please share with your conferences and members. Systemic racism and the need to recognize and act on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion should be part of all of our work as Vincentians.

Like Indigenous Peoples, Black communities are disproportionately affected by homelessness, and they experience the highest rate of homelessness of any racialized community in Canada after Indigenous Peoples. Although only 4.3% of Canadians identified as Black in the 2021 census, 15.4% of youth experiencing homelessness nationally are Black, according to the second Without a Home survey. Black people are also twice as likely as white people to experience unsheltered homelessness, as indicated by the 2018 Canadian Housing Survey, and this proportion is even higher for Black women.



This disproportionate representation is concentrated in certain areas. For instance, in Toronto in 2021, 31% of the homeless population was Black, despite representing only 7.5% of the city's total population.

One reason for this disproportionate rate of homelessness is the failure of systems, namely the child welfare, education, and justice systems. Another reason is discrimination. These are all manifestations of anti-Black racism, which plays out at every level of society to systematically disadvantage Black people, making them more likely to experience homelessness at all stages of life. Someone with more privilege may not become homeless because of a lost job or family conflict, for instance, but the failure of systems for Black people makes this more likely.

Black History Month

Before digging into the reasons for this higher rate of homelessness, it is important to note that focusing on these negative experiences can perpetuate racist stereotypes. Although it is important to notice that Black communities are disproportionately impacted by homelessness and its causes in order to address systemic racism, we need to also keep in mind that it is not the full story of Black communities in Canada.

Child Welfare System

In 2018, a report by the Ontario Human Rights Commission found that the proportion of Black youth in the child welfare system was more than double their proportion in the general population. Once Black families are involved with the child welfare services, they are investigated at a rate double what would be expected based on their number: Black children make up 7% of child welfare cases but about 14% of investigations. Black children are 2.2 times as likely to be investigated, 2.5 times as likely to be substantiated, 1.7 times as likely to be transferred to ongoing services, and 2.5 times as likely to be placed in care during the investigation. Although terms like "placed in care" might sound banal, what it refers to is the breakup of Black families. And when we consider that about 47% of homeless youth were found to have been placed in care at some point in their lives, we can see that family disruption is a factor that contributes to homelessness.

Criminal Justice System

Involvement in the criminal justice system is another factor that contributes to homelessness. Youths placed in the child welfare system are significantly more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system, in what has been called the child-welfare-to-prison pipeline. Once in contact with the criminal justice system, Black youth are over-criminalized and receive more charges, including more administration of justice charges (breaches of bail or probation). The criminalization of Black communities also occurs through the over-policing of neighbourhoods with large Black populations. Neighbourhoods that are considered high crime see preventive policing strategies deployed, which involves more monitoring and patrolling and increases the chance that Black youth will come into contact with the police. This means that Black youth are more likely to be criminalized for their behaviour than non-Black youth, bringing them into the justice system.

Education and Employment

In the education system, Black youth are more likely to be suspended, expelled, or pushed out of school. Black youth face mistrust and low expectations in school, leading them to be streamed into non-academic courses. Experiences of discrimination are common, and Black students are more likely to leave high school before graduating, are less likely to enroll in post-secondary education, have lower post-secondary enrolment rates, and are more likely to have precarious work when they begin employment. Low educational attainment is a major barrier to employment and a risk factor for homelessness. Beyond high-school, although Black Canadians are more likely to have a university degree than white Canadians, their employment rate is lower. Similarly, they are about 40% less likely to occupy management roles in the workforce, speaking to lower rates of promotion. This contributes to the fact that 12.4% of Black people live in poverty, compared to 8.1% of the overall population, according to the 2021 census. Poverty is a key factor in housing insecurity, which puts individuals and families just one unforeseen event away from homelessness.

The child welfare, criminal justice, and education system are just three examples of systems that perpetuate anti-Black racism and expose Black communities to a higher risk of homelessness. We could tell similar stories about the healthcare, immigration, and other systems as well.

Preventing homelessness within Black communities in Canada is an urgent imperative that requires targeted interventions to address the systemic disparities that contribute to their higher risk of housing instability. By focusing on early interventions in areas such as the child welfare, education, and criminal justice systems, we can disrupt the cycle of homelessness before it begins. This includes implementing policies to reduce overrepresentation of Black youth in child welfare cases, addressing disparities in educational outcomes through anti-discrimination measures and support services, and reforming the criminal justice system to combat over-criminalization and ensure equitable treatment. Additionally, promoting economic opportunities and addressing poverty within the Black community is essential to providing long-term housing security. By recognizing and addressing the root causes of homelessness within Black communities and implementing targeted solutions, we can work to prevent and end Black homelessness.