Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Homelessness – Part 1
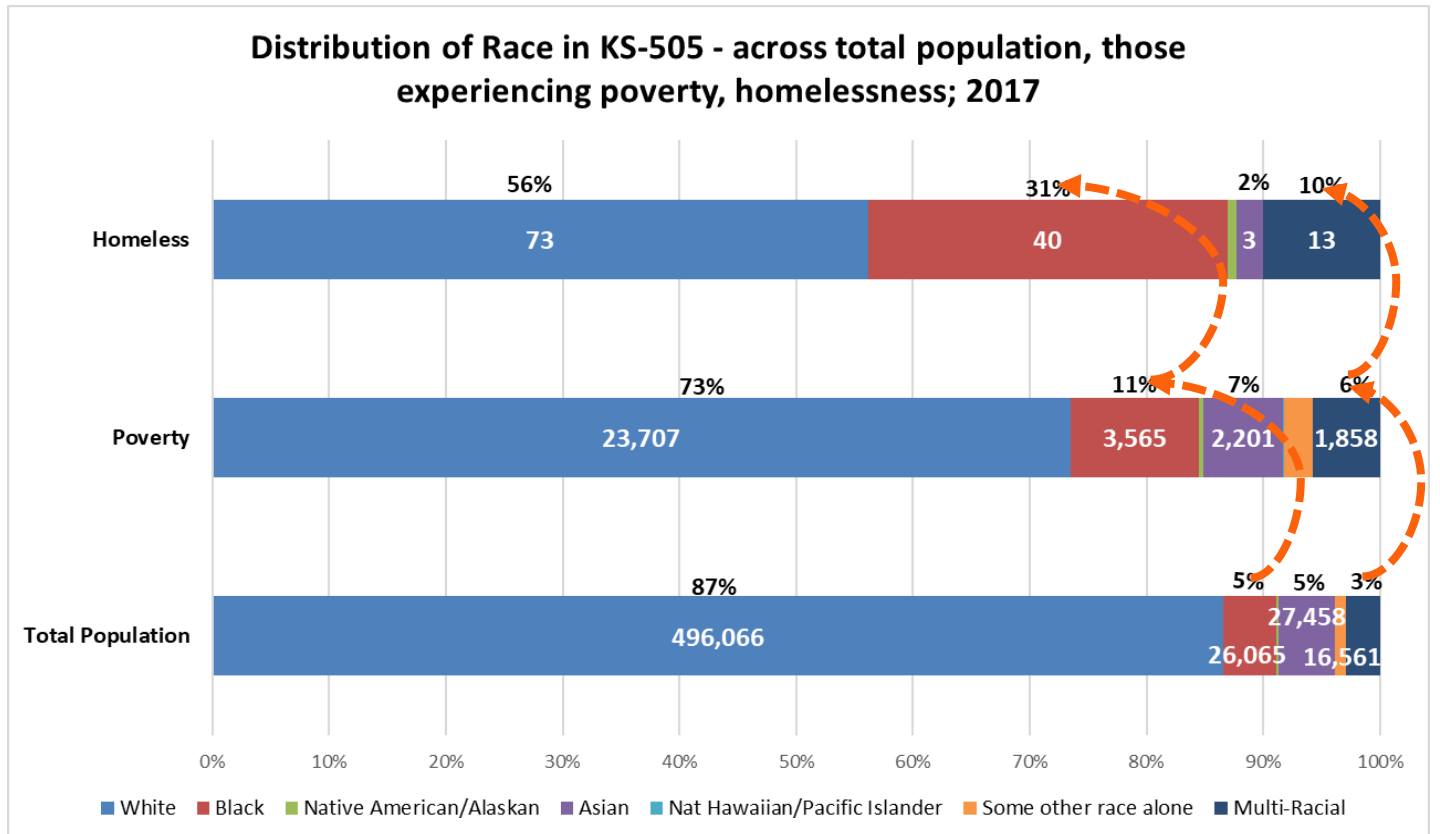
Each year Johnson County's Continuum of Care on Homelessness (KS-505 CoC) counts persons who are experiencing homelessness and collects information about them to help us understand not only who is experiencing homelessness in our community but also the complex and interacting factors that contribute to their housing history. Factors such as job loss, physical and mental disabilities, eviction, criminal justice histories, domestic violence and trauma are examined. This information assists the CoC identify the kinds of challenges those we serve are experiencing, the gaps in services, and what supports are needed to either prevent homelessness or assure it's a one-time, short-lived experience.

In past years, annual reports have noted that racial and ethnic minorities in the community are overrepresented in the annual Point in Time Count (PIT) of homelessness. They represent higher proportions of the total count than they do the general population or the population experiencing poverty. In 2019, the KS-505 CoC is delving deeper into these disparities in homelessness to understand and identify contributing factors and intentionally take steps to address them in order to achieve equity and improve outcomes. Ending homelessness is the goal of the CoC. That goal cannot be achieved without addressing the root causes and systems that result in disparate outcomes for different populations.
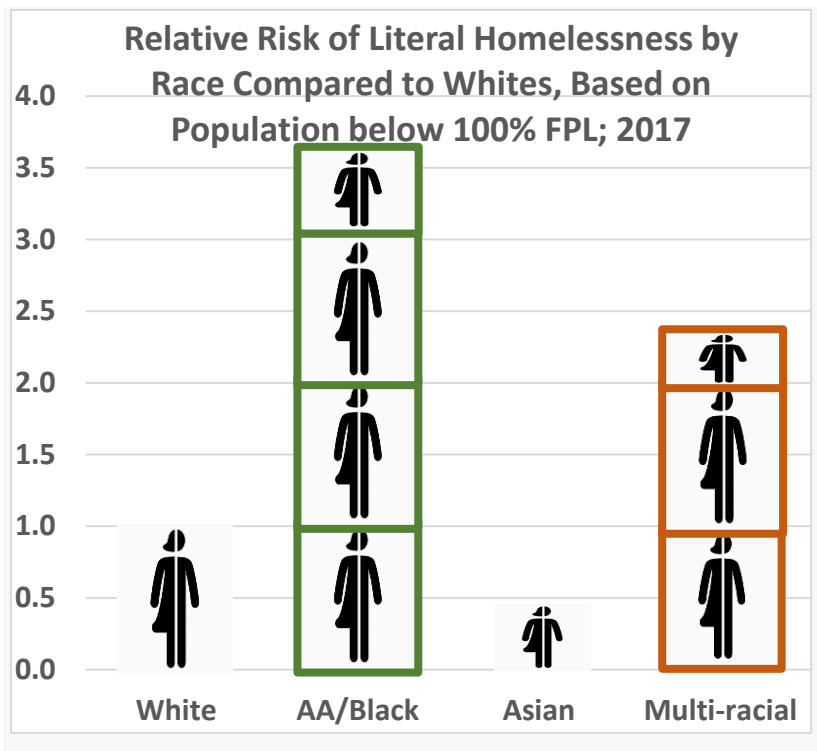
The concept of fairness – of equity – is deeply rooted in our understanding of how the social world works. In order to live up to our democratic ideals — of a fair and just society — racial equity and inclusion must be foundational to how our systems, policies and culture are shaped. The work is to achieve equity – where all have the same opportunity to reach their potential, unencumbered by barriers created by our community's and country's history, culture and institutions. And while **no one** should experience homelessness, **no group or groups should bear a greater burden of homelessness than another based on their race or ethnicity.**

STARTING WITH THE DATA

Distribution of Race in KS-505 - across total population, those experiencing poverty, homelessness; 2017

Homeless: White 73 (56%), Black 40 (31%), Asian 3 (2%), Multi-Racial 13 (10%)

Poverty: White 23,707 (73%), Black 3,565 (11%), Asian 2,201 (7%), Multi-Racial 1,858 (6%)

Total Population: White 496,066 (87%), Black 27,458 (5%), 26,065, Asian 16,561 (5%), (3%)

Legend: ■ White ■ Black ■ Native American/Alaskan ■ Asian ■ Nat Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ■ Some other race alone ■ Multi-Racial

In order to understand disparities in outcomes around homelessness, KS-505 CoC examined both the overall racial makeup of Johnson County's overall population, the population experiencing homelessness, and those residents experiencing poverty in 2017, using data from the 2013-2017 American Community Survey and KS-505's annual point in time count of homelessness – a one day count of those who are literally homeless – in shelter or on the streets - on one night in January.

As shown on the previous graph, while African Americans/Blacks made up 5% of Johnson County's total population in 2017, they made up 11% of those living in poverty (below 100% of the federal poverty level or FPL), and 31% of those who were literally homeless. Similarly, those who identified as Multi-Racial made up 3% of the total population, while they made up 6% and 10% of those living in poverty and those experiencing homelessness in 2017, respectively.

Relative Risk of Literal Homelessness by Race Compared to Whites, Based on Population below 100% FPL; 2017

Relative risk (RR) ratio analyses are a way to describe one group's risk or likelihood for an outcome compared to another – such as risk for homelessness for those who are African American/Black compared to those who identify as White.

Assessing whether disparities in risk for homelessness exist based on the distribution by race for the population living below 100% of the federal poverty level, versus the total population, reduces the impact of disparities attributable to differences in median income between groups.
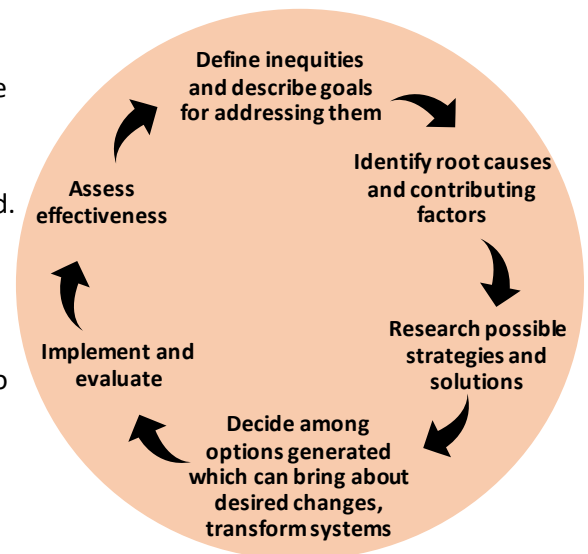
In KS-505, based on those living below 100% of the FPL, African Americans/Blacks were 3.6 times more likely to experience homelessness than Whites. Those who identified as Multi-Racial were 2.3 times more likely than Whites. Asians were less likely than Whites to experience homelessness.

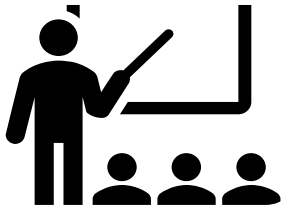## KS-505's INITIAL STEPS TO ADDRESS RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES

The CoC's Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Homelessness (R/EDH) work team has been meeting since April 2019 to examine disparities by race and ethnicity in KS-505's homeless response system – first by examining whether racial and ethnic disparities exist and for what groups, then exploring what strategies might be implemented to address them. While the group has specifically come together to focus on racial and ethnic disparities within the homelessness system, the larger context within which these characteristics impact opportunities and outcomes for those served in that system cannot be ignored.

While the racial and ethnic characteristics of PIT count results have been published and examined annually, a relative risk ratio analysis to clearly illustrate differential risk for groups had not. Undertaking an RRR analysis has assisted KS-505 more clearly understand who is experiencing disparities and to what extent, but it is limited in identifying the root causes of those disparities. While the R/EDH work team continues to work on identifying root causes, universal strategies that will benefit the CoC's membership and improve outcomes have already been embraced.

Analyzing and Addressing the Issue

Define inequities and describe goals for addressing them

Identify root causes and contributing factors

Research possible strategies and solutions

Decide among options generated which can bring about desired changes, transform systems

Implement and evaluate

Assess effectiveness
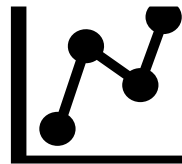
Educate full CoC membership on R/E disparities

Conduct Implicit Bias training for CoC membership and Board

Intentionally recruit diverse Board and Committee leadership

Create a diverse Lived Experience Advisory Board

Begin Analysis of Coordinated Entry and HMIS data for disparities, to inform root causes, contributing factors

The initial strategies are universally targeted ones that will benefit the CoC's member organizations and system overall but will not be adequate to shift disparities in and of themselves. CoC members recognize that in order to surface root causes and then construct and implement effective strategies, members will need to engage in an iterative process which will require ongoing analysis of current disparities across different parts of the homelessness system, examination of both factors that may be impacting those rates and best practices to address disparities, and following focused actions, ongoing evaluation of impact and effectiveness.

Likely analyses in the coming months that will inform targeted actions:

- Does race or ethnicity impact whether a household is likely to receive assistance through the homelessness response system? If so, what factors may cause this difference?
- Is a household's race or ethnicity related to the likelihood that they successfully exit homelessness for a permanent housing destination? Does it impact how quickly a household exits to permanent housing?
- Does the racial or ethnic distribution vary across different components of the homelessness response system (e.g. emergency shelter vs permanent supportive housing vs rapid-housing, etc.) and why?
- Do CoC member organizations and their boards reflect the race and ethnicity of the clients that they serve? What factors effect organizations' hiring and promotional practices that might be a barrier to greater diversity?

Race holds a central place in many longstanding inequities – KS-505 CoC members' work to address disparities in the homelessness system cannot change the histories of our country, our community or those that enter the homelessness system. But we do have the power to change policies and procedures that may differentially impact different groups, leading to disparities in outcomes. For KS 505 this analysis is the CoC's first step towards establishing equity in the homelessness system.

Productive conversations around longstanding issues require a shared set of terms for which there is an agreed upon definition. As this work moves forward in the future, the KS-505 R/EDH Work Team will build and include a set of definitions on which communication and understanding can be built. The following definitions or concepts are based on those provided by the FreeDictionary and Annie E. Casey Foundation's Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide.

Disparity - the condition or fact of being unequal; difference.

Equity - the state, quality or ideal of being just, impartial and fair. The concept of equity is synonymous with fairness and justice. To be achieved and sustained, equity needs to be thought of as a structural and systemic concept that can be changed or improved. Equity should not be dismissed as a lofty value or inherently unattainable goal.

Ethnicity – the term to describe the characteristics, background or affiliation that is shared among a group of people with a common cultural or national heritage, sometimes also a common language or religion.

Inclusion - is the action or state of including or of being included within a group or structure. Inclusion involves authentic and empowered participation and a true sense of belonging among all within a group or structure.

Race – a group of people identified as distinct from other groups because of supposed physical or genetic traits shared by the group. Most biologists and anthropologists do not recognize race as a biologically valid classification, but instead a socially constructed system of categorizing humans largely based on observable physical features or on ancestry.

Racial justice - is the systematic fair treatment of people of all races that results in equitable opportunities and outcomes for everyone. In a racially just environment, all people can achieve their full potential in life, regardless of race, ethnicity or the community in which they live.

Racism - the belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability, with some groups superior and others inferior; discrimination or prejudice based on race. Racism is not limited to those actions or non-actions that are: by an individual, conscious, and intentional. It can instead reflect systems of hierarchies and inequities that range from the personal to the structural/institutional and result in disparate outcomes for different populations. Racism can be internalized or interpersonal at the micro level within or between people or it can be at the institutional, structural or systems level, reflecting biases and conferring advantage or disadvantage to one group versus another group through systems.

Relative Risk Ratio (or RRR) - the ratio of the probability of an outcome or event occurring in one group to the probability of an outcome or event occurring in another comparison group. It measures the likelihood of an event occurring for one group (e.g. African Americans) compared to it happening for another group (e.g. Whites) such as "African Americans are X times more/less likely than Whites to experience homelessness.