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What do People Experiencing Homelessness Need?

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Tents are set up in Portland's Old Town neighborhood. (Photo by Joanne Zuhl)

Opinion | What do people experiencing homelessness need?

A survey in Portland reveals profound racial disparities even in basic answers about where people sleep

by **Marisa A. Zapata** | 2 Dec 2020

Every two years, homeless service providers and volunteers spread out across their communities to conduct a census of people experiencing homelessness. They ask basic questions about demographics and experiences of people sleeping on the streets or in shelters. For people who are unsheltered, this count may be the only time their stories get reflected in a large data set.

This Point in Time survey reconfirms what we already know: There are dramatic disparities for people of color experiencing homelessness, on the street and in shelters, when compared to people who are white. But what it fails to tell us is what people experiencing homelessness need, want and are concerned about, which gives clues to what solutions might be effective. What do communities of color need? What does everyone experiencing homelessness need? You won't find that in the Point in Time count.

Knowing what people experiencing homelessness need is even more critical now. The answers could influence how approximately \$2.5 billion is spent to support people experiencing homelessness over the next 10 years. Voters approved the Metro Supportive Housing Services measure to help people experiencing homelessness access and keep their housing, and now Multnomah County must complete a local implementation plan to show how it will spend the funds. So back to our

question: What do people experiencing homelessness actually need to live their lives fully and move into housing?

To help answer these questions, Portland State University's Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative worked with the Joint Office of Homeless Services, Shannon Singleton*, and our friends at Street Roots to survey people who are living unsheltered to better understand what's working and what's not. Because of the racial disparities that we know exist, we set out to create and administrate a survey that would also ask these questions with a focus on people of color.

Other surveys

- [Believe our stories and listen: Perspectives on first response on the streets](#)
- [Moving into motels, hotels is top choice of unhoused people during pandemic](#)

In all, 383 people took the rapidly deployed and quickly crafted survey over the course of two weeks. Nearly 40% of those surveyed identified as people of color with the highest representation among Black people and Native Americans.**

The results of the survey reveal profound racial disparities even in basic answers about who accesses shelter or who pitches tents. More than 1 in 4 people of color slept on the streets without a tent compared to only 1 in 10 people who are white. In addition, people of color were less likely to access shelters. That's

a stark difference in how people of color experience unsheltered homelessness and an important distinction.

For people of color, the importance of acceptance, and the concerns about discrimination dominated many survey questions. When asked "What would make you feel more supported in community?" Native Americans listed "fewer incidents of racial discrimination" almost as frequently as food. This is a clear message: 'I need to not be discriminated against at the same level as I need food for survival.' Belonging to the group and being accepted means survival, not only in terms of who gets resources but also in terms of acknowledging basic human dignity.

Similarly, Black community members listed having more positive neighbor interactions almost as often as food in what would make them feel supported. For Black people, apprehension about racism was strongly tied to worries about moving back into housing. Racism from the property manager and living with people who were not Black were second and third only to losing housing itself.

When we asked "How do you know that a place or organization will understand your racial identity?" The most frequent answers included "people who work there look like you," "you feel accepted for who you are," and "you do not experience racism or discrimination." Latinos and Native Americans listed "people who work there talk like you" even more frequently than the need for workers who look like them. Just as important for Native Americans was "your concerns about how you are treated because of your race or ethnicity are acted on."

Defying stereotypes, people of color across the board reported that having access to a therapist in the following week would make them feel more supported. In the previous week, only 8% felt supported by a therapist. For the next week? Twenty-two percent of people of color believed that a therapist could help them. Similar rates played out for health care providers and case workers. People of color imagined a world where the support and help they needed existed, and they engaged in those services.

The survey also brought other critical human needs into stark relief. When asked “What has made you feel supported in community?,” one of the top answers across the board for all racial groups was access to bathrooms. “What would make you feel more supported?” The top answers after stable housing were access to bathrooms, earning an income, friendship and food.

Reading across all of the survey responses, I saw how important it was for people to have friends and family and spaces to be together with one another. For example, living someplace where friends and family could visit freely was one of the top three most frequently shared needs for housing, as well as one of the things that made people feel the most supported. People shared worries about becoming isolated if they moved into housing, and fears of losing that housing again.

When people talk about the solution to homelessness being housing and appropriate supportive services, they aren’t wrong. But what we miss with that talking point is that services aren’t just “job training,” or “behavioral health care.” Housing isn’t merely units with four walls, a bathroom and kitchen. These services and housing are key. But behind those words, what people want are human connections — a therapist who accepts their identity, an opportunity to earn income or a lover. They need the security of a home, not conditions they must fulfill for the privilege of having a place to live. Consider that some housing complexes place restrictions on the number or time friends and family can visit. One of the things that survey participants said time and again brought them comfort, and that one of their top worries about moving into housing was having to follow the rules. What happens when the rules deny you the things that are essential to your well-being?

Racism also blocks this human connection in tangible ways. You cannot solve homelessness without addressing the racism that feeds it. When racial disparities show up in results as basic as who accesses shelter, you know something is broken. Can Black people access shelter when workers don’t accept them for who they are? Can they access housing when they face discrimination from the landlord or must worry about living alongside people who aren’t Black? We need policies, programs and culturally specific services that address racism.

As money begins flowing from the Metro fund next year, the services and resources provided have the real opportunity to make a significant difference. Matched with the revenue measures for affordable housing, voters have demonstrated their commitment to helping people who are struggling. By better understanding what helps people, and what they need, we can build relationships and programs that provide housing and services that will save and change lives.

Marisa A. Zapata is the director of the Homeless Research and Action Collaborative at Portland State University.

**Shannon Singleton participated in developing this survey as a private citizen. **Latino and Asian community members experiencing homelessness are often underrepresented in street counts.*

Street Roots is an award-winning weekly publication focusing on economic, environmental and social justice issues. The newspaper is sold in Portland, Oregon, by people experiencing homelessness and/or extreme poverty as means of earning an income with dignity. Street Roots newspaper operates independently of Street Roots advocacy and is a part of the Street Roots organization. [Learn more about Street Roots](#). Support your community newspaper by [making a one-time or recurring gift today](#).

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