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Homeless in Seattle

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Racial Disparities in Homelessness: Historically and Today

The homelessness crisis in America is a national failure, rooted in the country’s history of racism. While any racial group can become homeless, Black and Native American communities do so disproportionately. Juxtaposing the historical narratives of racial disparities in homelessness from Josephine Ensign’s *Skid Road* with the contemporary findings of the SPARC report uncovers a continuity in systemic inequality, underscoring how these issues have evolved yet persist today.

Historically, racial disparities in homelessness have been due to systemic racism. In *Skid Road*, Ensign describes how Indigenous people like Kikisoblu—rechristened Princess Angeline by European settler Catherine Maynard—were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands and pushed into homelessness through discriminatory policies and racist social attitudes. Kikisoblu became a squatter living in a shack in Seattle, a city that banned Native people from residing there in 1865 (Ensign 37, 49). This displacement was not an isolated event but part of broader racial discrimination that pushed already marginalized groups further to the outskirts of society. The Seattle Board of Trustees institutionalized these inequities with Ordinance No. 5, which forced Native people out of the city and exacerbated their vulnerability to homelessness (Ensign 49).

The SPARC report captures a contemporary view of these racial disparities that, unfortunately, have persisted throughout history. For instance, the survey findings indicate that Black and Native people are strongly overrepresented in homeless populations across the USA. As the report states, "while Black people make up 13% of the general population, they account for over 40% of the homeless population" (SPARC 6). Additionally, Native Americans are three to eight times more likely than other members of the general population to become homeless (SPARC 4). Since these statistics deviate from the makeup of the general demographic, they underscore the structural inequities impacting communities of color. The SPARC report’s findings align with the historical trends shown in *Skid Road* and illustrate that the marginalization of these communities is not just a contemporary issue but an ongoing one.

The lack of affordable housing is a key factor contributing to these racial disparities. In *Skid Road*, Ensign paints a picture of Seattle’s Shantytown, where residents, many of whom were people of color, lived in one-room wood structures on city-owned lots (Ensign 34). These early forms of inadequate housing reflect an issue that continues to affect marginalized communities today. SPARC elaborates on this by documenting persistent housing instability among people of color, noting that housing costs are an important driver of homelessness (SPARC 13). This housing instability is exacerbated by systemic barriers, such as racially discriminatory practices in the housing market—like redlining—and broader issues within the criminal justice system. Criminal justice involvement is a significant barrier to effectively exiting homelessness, as shown in both *Skid Road* and the SPARC report. Ensign discusses the historical criminalization of homelessness, particularly in relation to marginalized groups, as a means of controlling and punishing them for their economic status, a stigma compounded by racism (Ensign 35). This criminalization continues today, with the SPARC report finding that involvement with the criminal justice system often prevents individuals from securing stable housing (SPARC 13). As one respondent noted, a felony on their record barred them from finding housing, even when they had been granted a housing voucher (SPARC 13). These barriers keep the criminal justice system complicit in perpetuating homelessness and systemic racism.

Racial disparities in homelessness are products of deeply entrenched systemic racism that has been present for centuries. These disparities, documented from *Skid Road* to the SPARC report, will continue unless systemic changes are made to actively dismantle the structures of inequality that marginalize people of color. By putting the historical context and contemporary realities of racial disparities in homelessness into perspective, policymakers can begin to draft more equitable solutions.

Work Cited

Ensign, Josephine. *Skid Road : On the Frontier of Health and Homelessness in Seattle*. First

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