Racial Disparities in Homelessness

While it may not seem like it, racial disparities can be seen in homelessness both historically and today. These disparities including education, employment, and housing.

Many people, particularly people who are not white, often face disparities in education. This lack of education can make it hard to find jobs, often leading to homelessness. This can be seen historically in Seattle through the women who were working as prostitutes; “the clear majority of the girls and women who worked as prostitutes came from impoverished, often physical and sexual abuse-filled backgrounds, were of racial and ethnic minority status, and lacked access to education or training for other types of paid work, like being a school teacher or nurse”(Ensign 47). Many of these women could not attend school because many of them were native Americans. Even if they were allowed to attend a school, they would not be able to pay for it. These disparities can still be seen today; “Homelessness reflects the failure of our social systems to serve people of all racial and ethnic groups equally in… education” (SPARC 7). Because of the current social system, it can be hard for different minorities to get a good education. These disparities can be seen through the fact that people of color graduate at a lower rate than white students. Because many jobs require a high school diploma, student of color who were not able to graduate and get their diploma will likely have a harder time finding jobs, putting them at higher risk of becoming homeless.

Due to disparities in employment, it was hard for many of the Indigenous people to find a job that paid a decent wage. Many of the jobs that they could find were labor-intensive; “without the labor of Indigenous people as millworkers and laundresses clam diggers and house builders prostitutes and potato Farmers, Seattle would have been just another failed frontier town”(Ensign 47). Even though the indigenous people were able to find jobs, it was still hard for them to exit homelessness because if they quit, it would be hard for them to find a better job, and without a source of income, they would just become homeless again, forcing them to continue working the same labor-intensive job indefinitely. Many racial disparities are still seen in the work force today; “Unless we as a field address structural racism within… employment…we will continue to witness high rates of homelessness for people of color”(SPARC 21). Many of the people of color who are experiencing homelessness today are in the situation that they are in because of the racial disparities that are still seen in employment opportunities. Some of these disparities that can be seen both historically and today may be caused by the previously mentioned disparities in education.

Many people of color and Indigenous people also face disparities in housing. Many of the housing disparities that natives face in Seattle started in 1865; “This cumulated with the Seattle board of Trustees on February 7, 1865, passing ordinance No.5, which banned native people from living in Seattle. An exception was made for those working for Seattle residents like Henry Yesler, in which case the employers were ordered to provide the Indigenous with housing on their own property - something they did not do”(Ensign 49). Because of ordinate number five, if the natives that had lived in Seattle their entier lives wanted to continue living in settle, they would have to work for someone who was allowed to live there, but because of the limited number of jobs available, many of the natives would still have to leave Seattle, and because the employers did not provide their indigenous worker with housing it forces the native to find their own housing. These natives who were in search of housing would often build small houses in shanty towns where they would be illegally squatting. The natives were not the only people living in Shanty Town; many of the other people living there were immigrants and migrant workers who also had no better options. Many housing disparities still affect native Americans today; “centuries of structural racism that have excluded historically oppressed people—particularly Black and Native Americans—from equal access to housing”(SPARK 4). The same people who were facing disparities in housing are still among the most likely groups of people to experience this challenge of finding housing today. These natives are also less likely to exit out of homelessness into permanent housing without a subsidy, further showing these disparities not only affect the people trying to stay out of homelessness but also the people trying to escape it.

Racial disparities can be seen in homelessness both historically and today through education by the number of Indigenous women who worked as prostitutes, the structural racism in employment, and the lack of equal housing.