Addressing Racial Disparities in Austin/Travis County, TX

September 2019

OVERVIEW

The Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO) is committed to proactively addressing disparities and working toward the equitable provision of homeless services in Austin/Travis County. To this end, ECHO analyzes local and national data and best practices in addressing disparities, racism, and inequality. This document provides an overview of this analysis and the current steps ECHO, the Austin/Travis County Continuum of Care, and local homeless service partner agencies are taking and considering to work toward equity in all aspects of our work.

National research indicates that demographic characteristics such as race, sex, gender identity, Veteran status and sexual orientation influence pathways into and out of homelessness.[1] One of ECHO's goals is to better understand and address the root causes that place subgroups at higher risks of homelessness and facilitate community change by leading initiatives that reduce and/or eliminate individual and system barriers and create long-term solutions to end homelessness in our community.

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[1] University of Maryland (2016). Dr. Moser Jones Explores Race, Discrimination and Homelessness Connections. https://sph.umd.edu/news-item/dr-moser-jones-explores-race-discrimination-and-homelessness-connections.

Since the 1980s, Black and African American citizens have been overrepresented among the U.S. population experiencing homelessness, comprising roughly 40 percent of the total U.S. homeless population but only 13 percent of the overall population. Our local data shows similar statistics. Residents in Austin and Travis County who are Black or African American comprise 35 percent of the Austin/Travis County population experiencing homelessness, but only eight percent of the overall county population.

LGBTQA youth also experience homelessness in greater numbers at a national level. In Austin in 2017, approximately 23 percent[2] of youth experiencing homelessness in Austin identified as LGBTQA, more than triple the number of LGBTQA youth in the general population.[3]

For ease of analysis and readability, race and ethnicity categories in this analysis have been grouped together into white non-Hispanic/Latinx (White), Black/African American non-Hispanic/Latinx (Black/African American), and Hispanic/Latinx of any race (Hispanic/Latinx).

ACTION

ECHO partners are taking proactive steps to address disparities in the provision of homeless services. The Austin Action Plan to End Homelessness lists reducing disparities as one of its five key strategies. Below is a description of current actions as well as actions under consideration for future implementation.

CURRENT ACTIONS

LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES & BOARD REPRESENTATION

- ECHO provides several avenues for people with lived experience to provide feedback and influence decision-making. These include ECHO's Board, the Continuum of Care Membership Council and affiliated committees and workgroups, and the Austin Homeless Advisory Council (AHAC). AHAC is a committee comprised of 16 people with lived experience of homelessness, which is facilitated by the Downtown Austin Community Court and ECHO.
- Austin's Youth Homeless Demonstration Project (YHDP) Youth Collective is another board on which persons with lived experience can make decisions surrounding Austin's Action Plan to End Youth Homelessness.

REDUCING BARRIERS: CRIMINAL JUSTICE

- ECHO negotiates lower tenant screening criteria with landlords, property management companies, affordable housing providers, and the Austin and Travis County Public Housing Authorities. Reduced criminal screening criteria helps address the issue of disproportionate criminal justice involvement. Landlords or property management companies often use stringent screening criteria, even in cases when criminal charges pose no risk to property nor does it affect a person's ability to pay rent. Our goal is to increase housing opportunities regardless of

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[2] Voices of Youth Count (2017). Travis County, Texas: Report on Youth Homelessness.
[3] Gallup (2017). In U.S., More Adults Identifying as LGBT. https://news.gallup.com/poll/201731/lgbt-identificationrises.aspx.

barriers by strategically partnering with landlords. These efforts are supported by landlord incentive programs such as risk mitigation.

- ECHO and partner agencies participate in the Austin/Travis County Re-Entry Roundtable, an initiative that promotes effective reentry and reintegration of formerly incarcerated persons and individuals with criminal histories. ECHO worked in partnership with the Roundtable to create and publish a guide to aligning criminal screening policies with HUD guidance, which has led to the creation of more equitable policies (guide available here: https://bit.ly/2Q7jfqG).

- Following publication of the criminal screening policies guide, ECHO and community stakeholders engaged Austin's Public Housing Authority to amend and ultimately lower the criminal screening for their Housing Choice Voucher program.

ENDING HOMELESSNESS FOR HIGH UTILIZERS OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE & HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS

- ECHO is in the final stages of designing a Pay for Success supportive housing initiative to house 250 people experiencing homelessness who have had frequent interactions with the criminal justice system and the emergency medical system. There is a gap in services for the population with this overlap of needs, and this project will greatly reduce this gap.

- The Care Connections Clinic (CareCo) is a new initiative between ECHO, the SAFE Alliance (local victim services provider), CommUnity Care (local FQHC), and Integral Care (local Mental Health Authority), launched in March 2019. It will be a healthcare and navigation center for people experiencing homelessness. CareCo is a physical Healthcare for the Homeless location that provides medical services to uninsured and underinsured individuals to increase access to and reduce health disparities. The clinic also ensures that those who qualify for SOAR benefits are connected to vital resources to increase approval of submitted applications.

ENDING HOMELESSNESS FOR VULNERABLE SUB-POPULATIONS:

YOUTH
- ECHO works closely with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services to address the needs of young people at risk of aging out of foster care and entering homelessness. ECHO regularly monitors the demographics of young people entering homelessness and evaluates program enrollment and housing outcomes to address racial disparities in youth services.

- The Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) funding has increased services geared toward ending youth homelessness through increased outreach efforts and piloting new diversion interventions.

DOMESTIC ABUSE, DATING VIOLENCE, SEXUAL ASSAULT, STALKING, HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND OTHER TYPES OF ABUSE
- ECHO's Community Housing staff work with landlords and Victim Service Providers to increase awareness and education around VAWA housing protections and ensure that all community members, especially minority populations who are disproportionately exposed to housing and financial instability due to violence and abuse, can access safe and affordable housing.

- ECHO is the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Lead Agency and works with victim service providers using comparable databases to ensure that data is being evaluated to ensure equal access and representation across housing and service interventions offered by victim service providers.

- The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Housing Protection Workgroup trains direct service providers and has created templates on how to inform program participants of housing protections and increase affirmative marketing to build support and encourage people of color and other minorities to access resources that increase housing stability.

EQUAL ACCESS TO DIVERSE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES

- ECHO works in partnership with the Austin Tenants Council, the local fair housing advocate, to enforce fair housing protections and identify violations.
- ECHO uses rent reduction payments to ensure access to larger geographic dispersion for scattered site housing and increase capacity in high-opportunity areas.
- ECHO and community partners advocate with the City of Austin on matters related to the use of affordable housing dollars, specifically ensuring low- and no-barrier opportunities are included. The City of Austin currently has a density program that allows approval of increased density in exchange for on-site affordable units or a fee-in-lieu and is looking to expand that program through an overhaul of the land use development code.
- Austin recently passed Austin's third affordable housing bond in November 2018. This housing bond, in combination with the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program, has empowered Austin to further catalyze the development of affordable housing.

COORDINATED ENTRY APPROACH

- The Austin/Travis County Coordinated Entry system does not consider barriers such as income when determining program referral.
- ECHO partners work closely with the local Sherriff and police departments to enable jail in-reach and discharge planning.
- The Downtown Austin Community Court, the first community court established in Texas, offers rehabilitative services and adjudication for people experiencing homelessness.
- ECHO partners do not discharge/exit clients due to incarceration unless there is a funding ineligibility issue.
- ECHO works with the City of Austin and other non-ECHO partners to ensure all programs serving populations experiencing homelessness participate in Coordinated Entry.
- Austin's Sobering Center, opened in August 2018, provides an alternative to incarceration for people who may otherwise be arrested for public intoxication.
- ECHO regularly evaluates program data, including Coordinated Entry data, referral data, shelter data, and program exit data to maintain community awareness about needs and disparities.

COMMITTEES & RESOURCES ENGAGED IN SYSTEMS CHANGE

- ECHO is committed to providing ongoing training opportunities to reduce disparities through awareness and cultural competency. ECHO coordinates an annual training to educate the

partner agencies about the Equal Access Rule which also includes materials that address the creation of safe spaces for trans and non-binary individuals.

- ECHO offered a workshop to internal staff, and partner agency leaders and direct service providers on Race and Equity which helped participants to identify Equity as a community issue and identify strategies for advocacy/system change.
- ECHO participates in a Veterans Disparities Workgroup.
- ECHO leads the Employment and Income Workgroup that focuses on strategies to increase employment opportunities. Barriers to stable employment are faced by those who are involved in the criminal justice system, who have limited employment history as youth and gaps in employment due to homelessness/disabling conditions. Most importantly, economic and racial/ethnic disparities go hand in hand resulting in limited educational opportunities that perpetuate poverty and structural inequality.

PLANNED ACTIONS

- ECHO and the Housing Authority of the City of Austin are considering using small-area market rents in Housing Choice Voucher programs. This would allow access to higher-opportunity areas, at the cost of some vouchers.
- ECHO is continually creating new partnerships with stakeholders working to address racial disparities. Future partnerships of interest include the City of Austin's Equity Office and groups like Measure, a local nonprofit working to address disparities in the criminal justice system.
- ECHO is committed to continuously improving program monitoring and evaluation and continuing to incorporate measures related to equitable enrollment and outcomes into performance discussions.
- ECHO's Pay for Success evaluation may include a participatory research component. ECHO is interested in pursuing opportunities for participatory/participatory action research with clients, community members, and local stakeholders in the future.
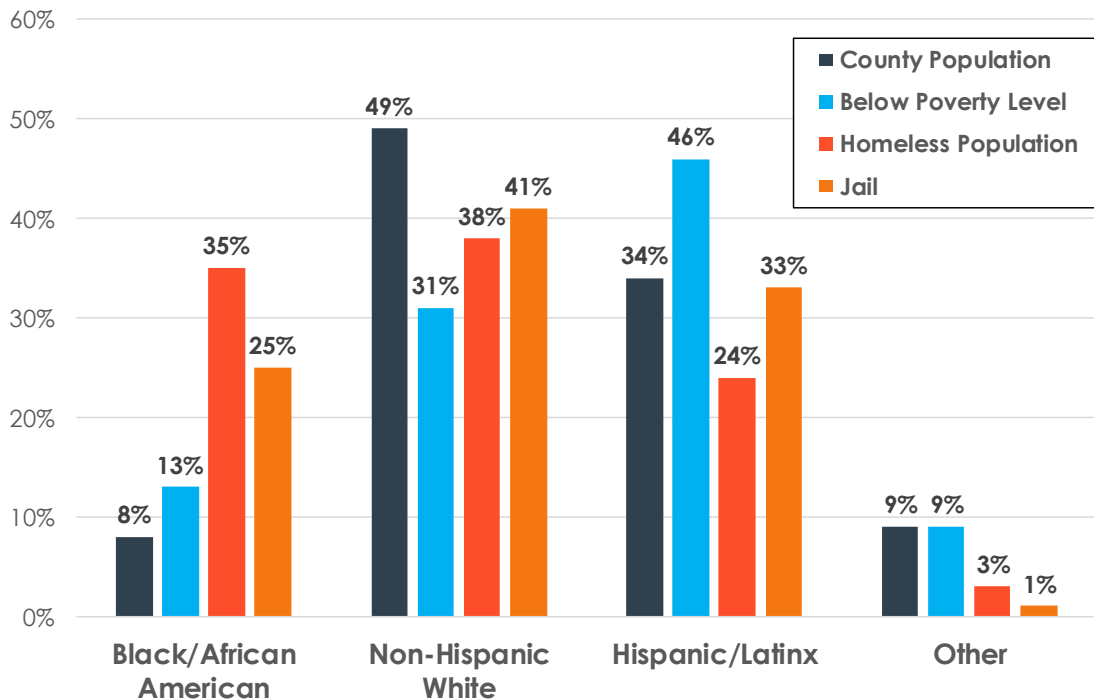
DATA

POPULATION DEMOGRAPHICS

The bars in each category on the graphs below represent the percentage of the specific population each group represents. For instance, on the National Data chart, white Americans make up a bit over 70 percent of the general population of the United States, and a bit under 30 percent of the total population experiencing homelessness. This means that white Americans are underrepresented in the total population experiencing homelessness in the United States relative to total population representation. On the Local Data slide, Black/African American residents account for 8 percent of Travis County's total population, but 35 percent of the population experiencing homelessness in the same area. This is a dramatic overrepresentation and a key challenge facing our homelessness response system and the Austin/Travis County community generally.

Racial/Ethnic Disparities

Black and African American residents of Austin/Travis County experience homelessness at disproportionate rates compared to total population percentage.

Disparities among youth experiencing homelessness are similar, with 42 percent of youth experiencing homelessness in Austin/Travis County identifying as Black or African American.[5]

In terms of age, the charts below show age information for all heads of household who were experiencing literal homelessness and interacted with the Austin/Travis County homeless response system between 2015 and 2018. In general, the population experiencing homelessness in Austin/Travis County is older compared to the general population.
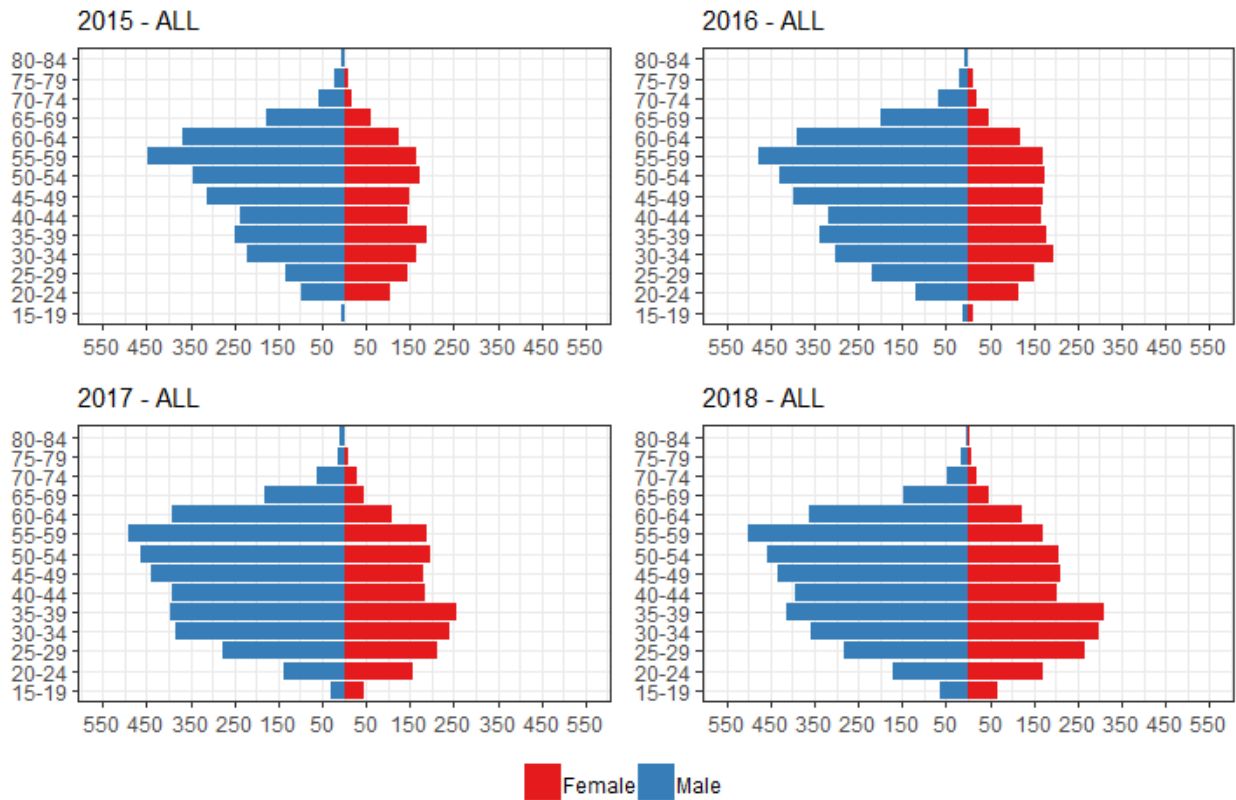
The population skews heavily toward single adult male households. The population appears to be getting proportionally younger, with a growing number of male clients in the 30-40 age range beginning in 2016

[4] Sources include:
- US Census Bureau. "Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months." 2016 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, S1701.
- US Census Bureau. "Hispanic of Latino Origin by Race." 2016 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, B03002.
- Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO). Analysis of 2018-2019 HMIS Data, September 2019.
- Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO). Analysis of Travis County Sheriff's Office Booking Data for 2017, January 2018.
- Grassroots Leadership. "Travis County Jail in 2015: Data Points to racism and longer confinement of African Americans." 2017.

[5] Austin/Travis County Coordinated Community Plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness.

and continuing in 2017 and 2018. The high number of adults over the age of 50 is in line with national trends related to the aging of the country's population experiencing homelessness. Since 2017 there appears to be a spike in women 20-39 experiencing homelessness. The reasons for this spike are unclear.
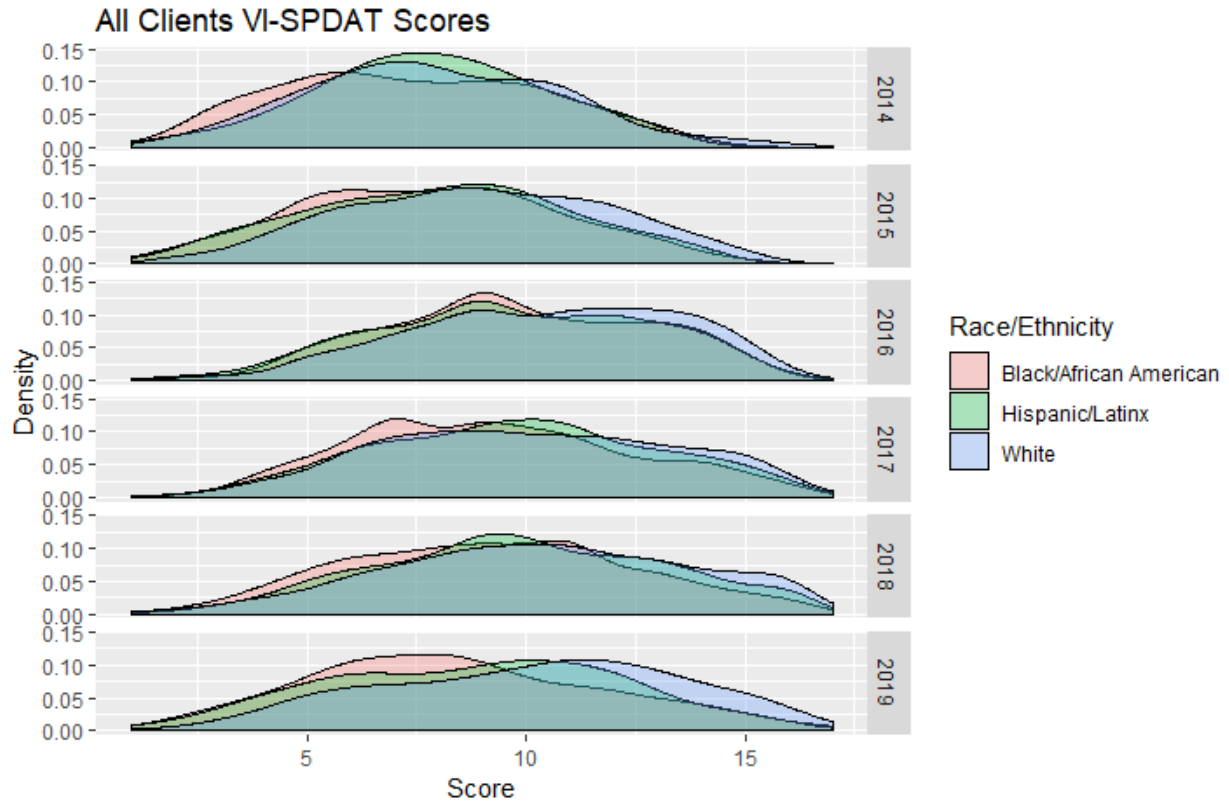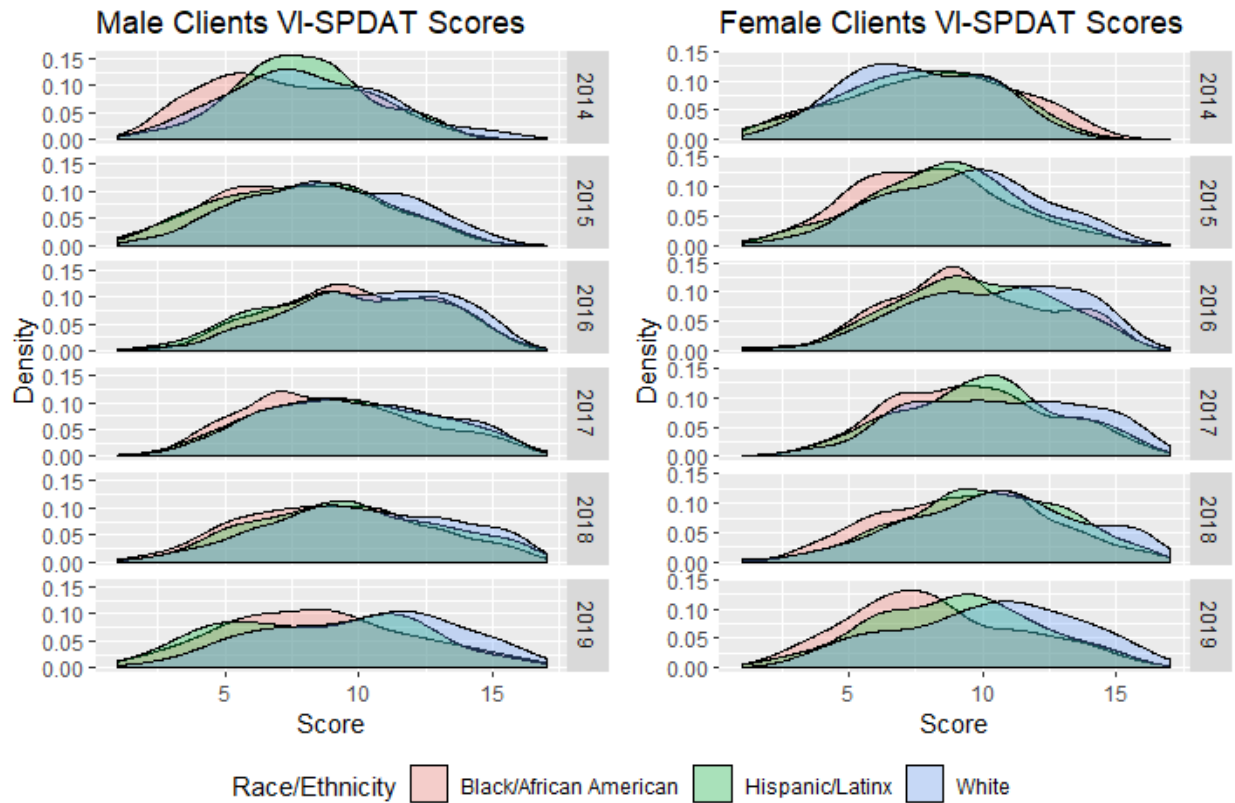

COORDINATED ENTRY

The following chart displays VI-SPDAT scores, used for Coordinated Entry prioritization, for all clients assessed from 2014 through September 2019. This data is from Austin/Travis County's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).

This chart shows that clients identifying as non-Hispanic/Latinx and White tend to have higher prioritization scores compared to clients identifying as non-Hispanic/Latinx and Black/African American. This trend emerged in 2015 and continues through 2019.

Hispanic/Latinx-identified clients have higher scores compared to non-Hispanic/Latinx Black or African American clients, but lower scores than white non-Hispanic/Latinx clients starting in 2017. This trend appears to be continuing in 2019.

All Clients VI-SPDAT Scores

The next chart displays the same breakdown for male- and female-identifying clients. In general, the same trends are seen in the gender breakdown.

Male Clients VI-SPDAT Scores

Female Clients VI-SPDAT Scores

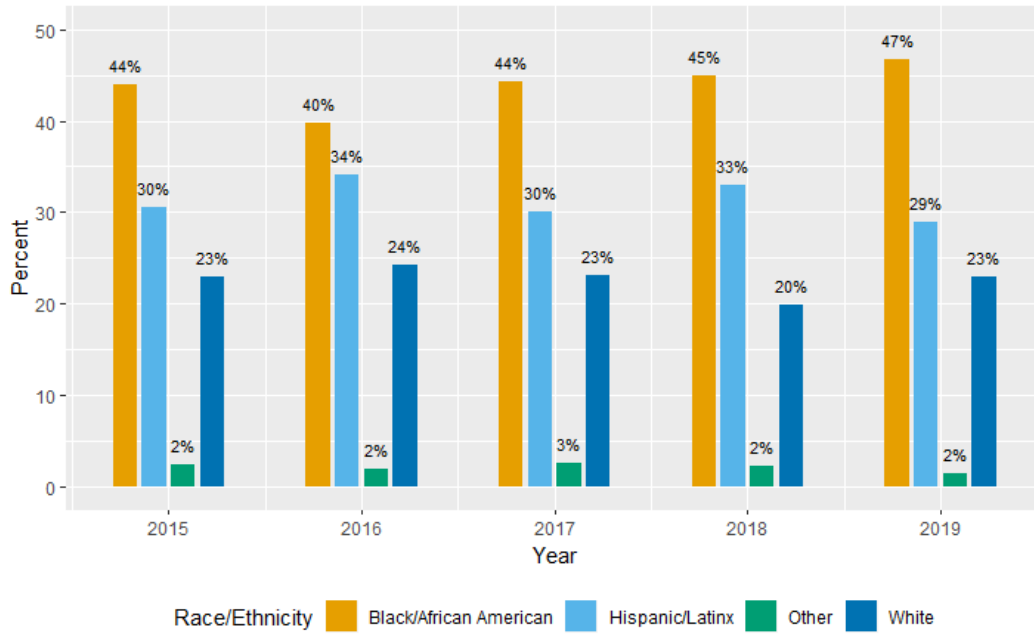Race/Ethnicity: Black/African American | Hispanic/Latinx | White
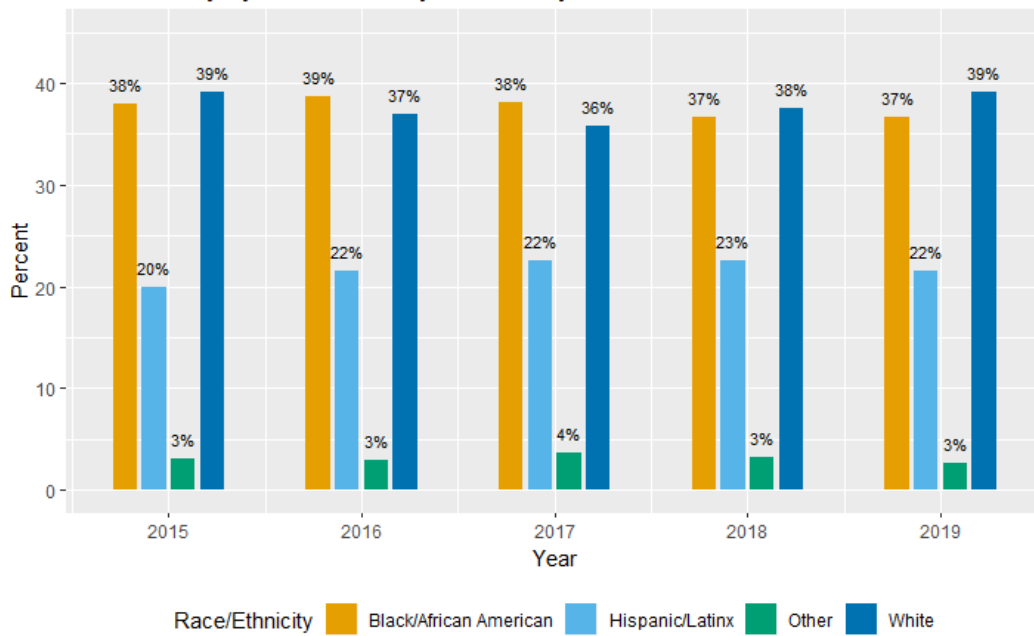
PROGRAM ENTRY

The following charts display program entry information for prevention, shelter, and housing programs. Apart from prevention programs, entry rates are roughly aligned with broad population percentages, though there appear to be discrepancies in Prevention entries, and somewhat in Housing entries. White clients enter prevention programs at much lower rates. White clients also enter Housing programs at slightly lower rates compared to population percentage.
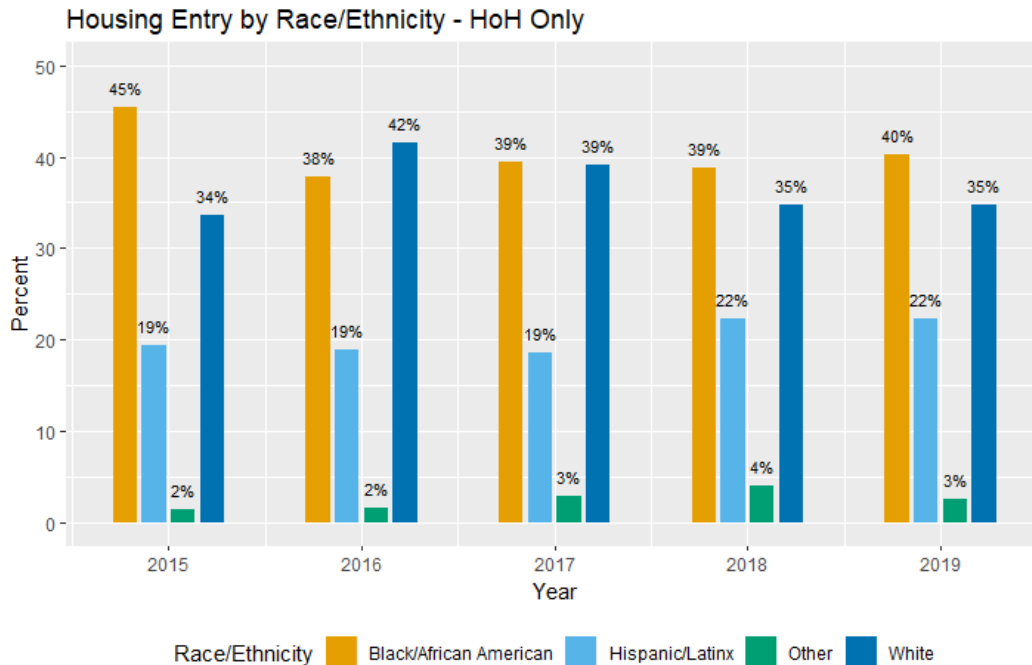
Information is provided for head of household (HoH) members only. This data is from Austin/Travis County's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Data is current as of September 2019.

Prevention Entry by Race/Ethnicity - HoH Only

Year	Black/African American	Hispanic/Latinx	Other	White
2015	44%	30%	2%	23%
2016	40%	34%	2%	24%
2017	44%	30%	3%	23%
2018	45%	33%	2%	20%
2019	47%	29%	2%	23%

Race/Ethnicity: Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, Other, White

Shelter Entry by Race/Ethnicity - HoH Only

Year	Black/African American	Hispanic/Latinx	Other	White
2015	38%	20%	3%	39%
2016	39%	22%	3%	37%
2017	38%	22%	4%	36%
2018	37%	23%	3%	38%
2019	37%	22%	3%	39%

Race/Ethnicity: Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, Other, White

Housing Entry by Race/Ethnicity - HoH Only

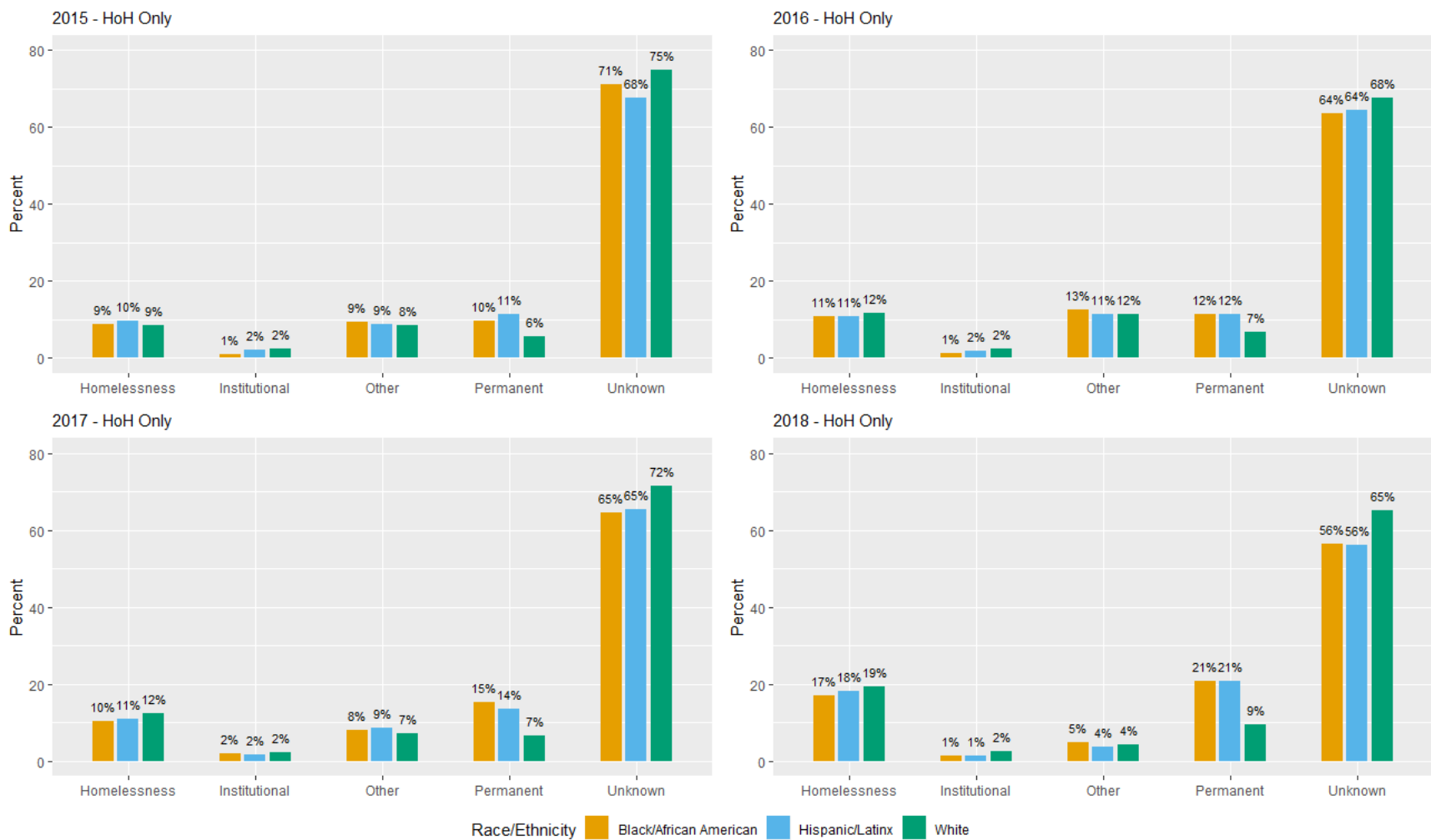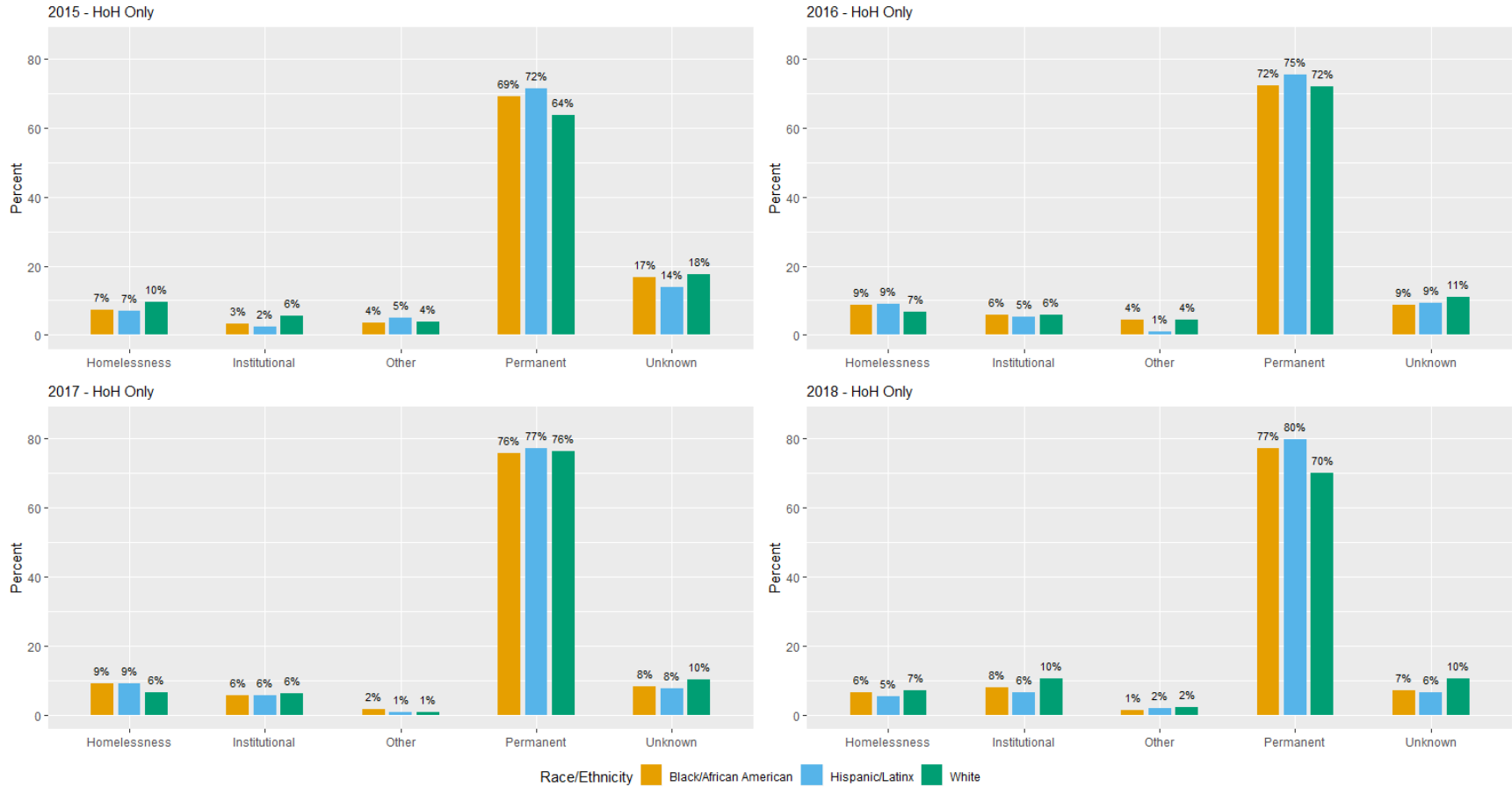**Race/Ethnicity** ■ Black/African American ■ Hispanic/Latinx ■ Other ■ White

EXITS

The following charts display program exit information for Shelter and Housing programs. There appears to be a slight pattern of increased negative exits and decreased positive exits for clients identifying as White that persists across years and increased slightly in 2018.

Information is provided for head of household members only. This data is from Austin/Travis County's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Data is current as of September 2019.

Shelter Exits

2015 - HoH Only

2016 - HoH Only

2017 - HoH Only

2018 - HoH Only

Race/Ethnicity: Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, White

Housing Exits

The following charts display returns to homelessness information for Shelter and Housing programs. Both program types exhibit disparate returns to homelessness for clients identifying as Black or African American. Time before return has historically been higher for these same clients, but this trend appears to be reversing. Returns proportion differences appear to be narrowing for Housing programs.

Information is provided for head of household members only. This data is from Austin/Travis County's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Data is current as of September 2019.
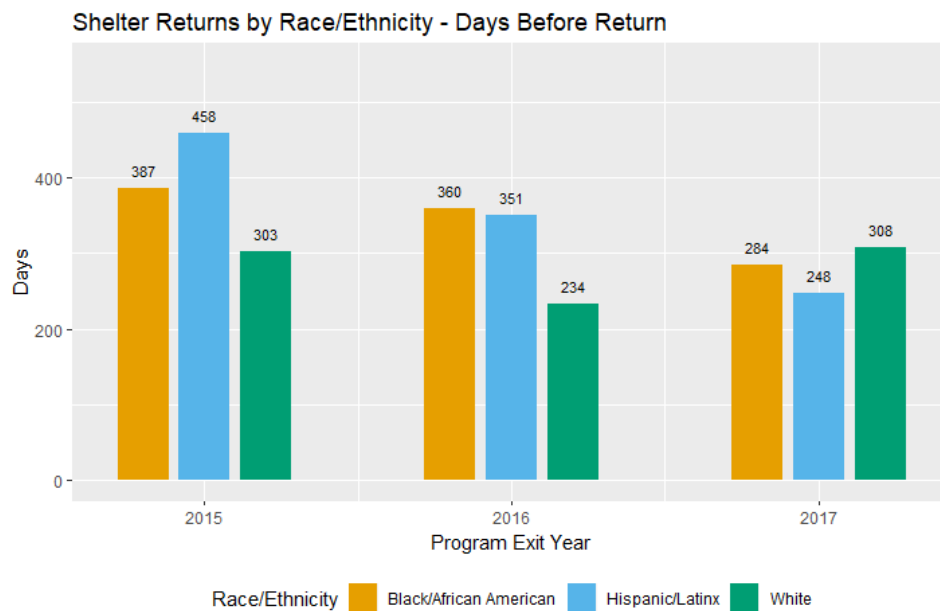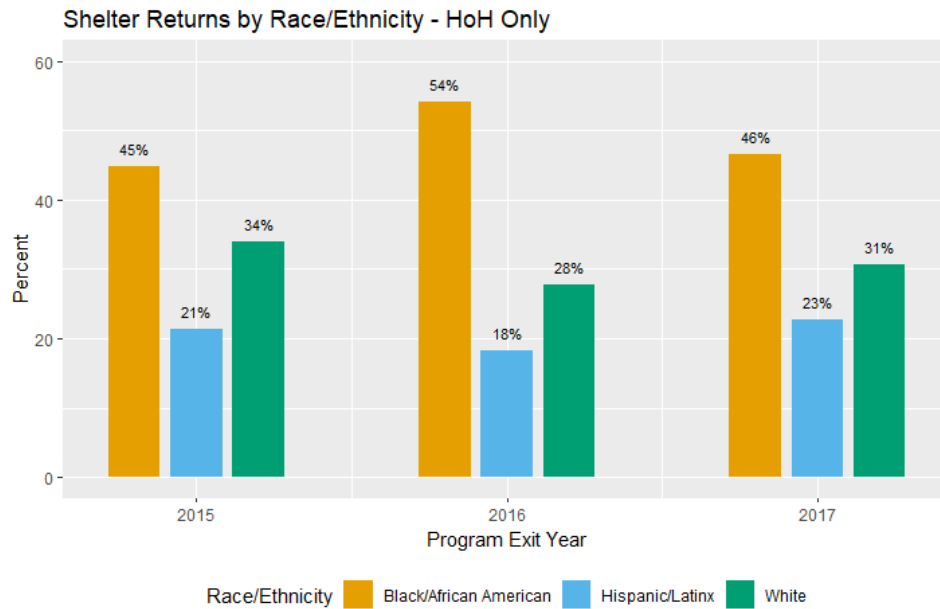
Shelter Returns by Race/Ethnicity - HoH Only
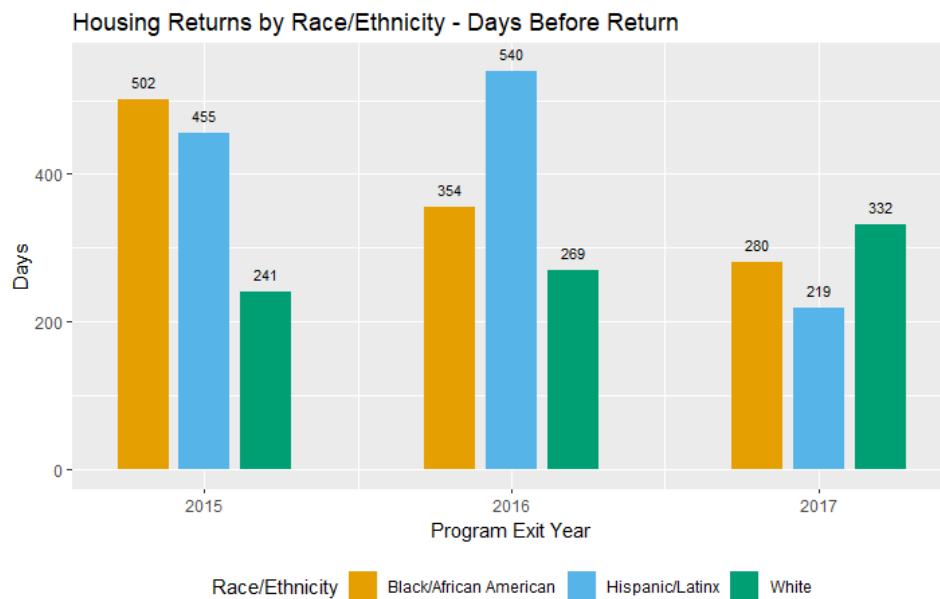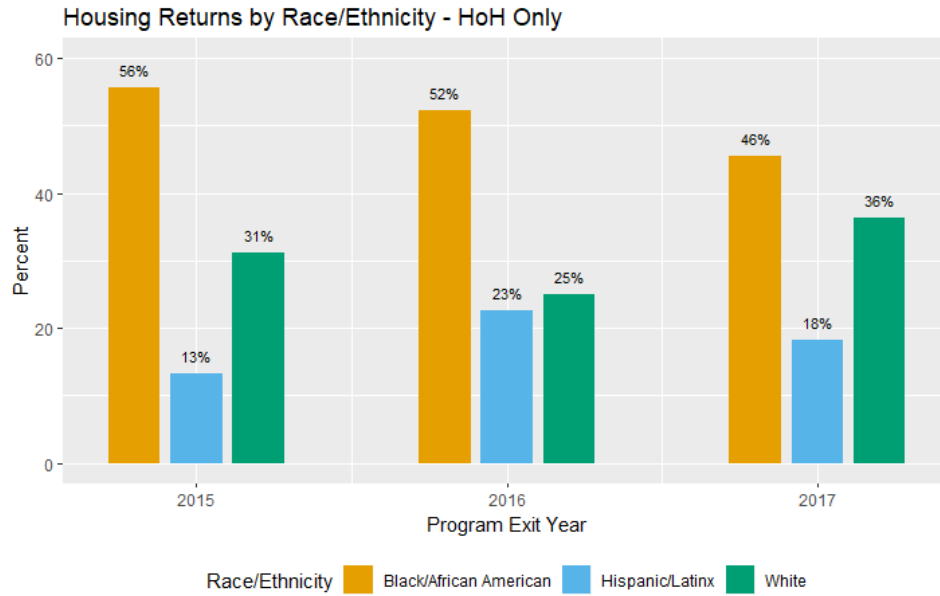

Shelter Returns by Race/Ethnicity - Days Before Return

Housing Returns by Race/Ethnicity - HoH Only

(Bar chart: Percent of Housing Returns by Program Exit Year)

2015: Black/African American 56%, Hispanic/Latinx 13%, White 31%
2016: Black/African American 52%, Hispanic/Latinx 23%, White 25%
2017: Black/African American 46%, Hispanic/Latinx 18%, White 36%

Race/Ethnicity: Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, White

Housing Returns by Race/Ethnicity - Days Before Return

(Bar chart: Days Before Return by Program Exit Year)

2015: Black/African American 502, Hispanic/Latinx 455, White 241
2016: Black/African American 354, Hispanic/Latinx 540, White 269
2017: Black/African American 280, Hispanic/Latinx 219, White 332

Race/Ethnicity: Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, White

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Results of this analysis are mixed, and somewhat inconclusive.

- Coordinated Entry VI-SPDAT assessment scores for White clients continue to be higher compared to Black/African American clients or Hispanic/Latinx clients. This gap appears to have increased in 2019 and is more pronounced for women. This result could be due to issues with the assessment itself, with the operationalization of the assessment, or simply due to differences in vulnerability in the population experiencing homelessness. Without additional information it is difficult to determine causality for this result.

- There appear to be some disparities in program entry, concentrated mainly on prevention entries, which continue to be primarily Black and African/American clients, followed by Hispanic/Latinx clients. This disparity is likely driven by systemic racism, inequality, and resultant poverty levels, though it is again difficult to attribute causality when looking only at one data source. Entries do not reflect the county's population experiencing poverty, an interesting result.

- Shelter and Housing entries continue to roughly mirror population percentages of residents experiencing homelessness. Both program types show slightly elevated enrollment rates for Black and African American clients compared to population percentages. This is an unlikely result when paired with vulnerability information. Because the number of clients housed each year in Austin and Travis County is so low compared to the population in need, it is possible that the assessment disparity noted above does not play a role when only considering the subset of clients scoring at the highest levels. Veteran program enrollments may also play a role in this discrepancy.

- Returns to homelessness show some level of disparity. Black and African American clients return at higher rates than expected, and days before return has decreased over time. Again, causality is difficult to determine without assessing other factors such as client needs and services provided, but this is a potentially worrisome result.