# Racial Disparities Report

Continuum of Care TX-503 – Austin/Travis County, Texas



**Austin/Travis County**
**TX-503 Continuum of Care**

## Introduction

The Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO) is committed to proactively addressing racial and ethnic disparities and working toward the equitable provision of homeless services in Austin/Travis County. The 2021 Racial Disparities Report for the TX-503 Austin/Travis County Continuum of Care provides an analysis of racial and ethnic disparities in the Homelessness Response System and describes the current steps that the System is taking to reach equity in homeless services. ECHO aims to better understand the differences in the prevalence of homelessness and homeless service outcomes between racial and ethnic groups in an effort to create equitable long-term solutions to ensure that access to housing stability does not differ based on race or ethnicity.

## Data

In this report, we use data from the Austin/Travis County Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), including client personal data, Coordinated Assessment data, and program entry and exit records. We supplement HMIS data with public census data for Travis County, Eviction Lab data, and voluntary survey data completed by Austin/Travis County Homelessness Response System staff and board members.

## About ECHO

ECHO is the Austin/Travis County Continuum of Care lead agency tasked with planning and coordinating community-wide strategies to end homelessness in the Austin and Travis County geographic region. We work in collaboration with community nonprofits and government agencies to coordinate services and housing resources for people experiencing homelessness (PEH) in our community. ECHO manages the local Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) database and uses research and evidence-based practices to advocate for the resources to bring the local Homelessness Response System to scale and meet our community's goal of making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring.

## Racial Disparities in the Population Experiencing Homelessness

The Black/African American population in Austin/Travis County is more disproportionately overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness than any other racial or ethnic group. The probability of experiencing homelessness in Travis County for a Black/African American person is approximately six times than that of a white person.
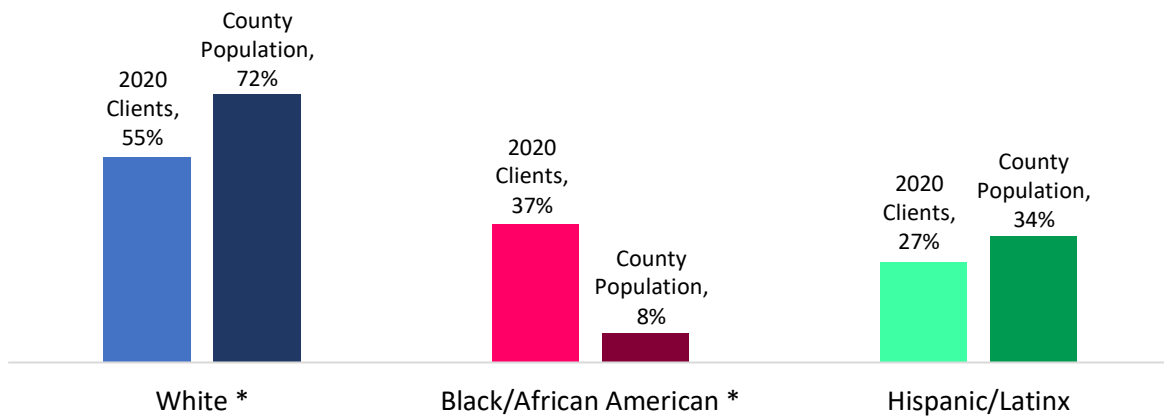
Of each of the intersections of race and ethnicity of clients that accessed services recorded in HMIS in 2020, non-Hispanic/Latinx Black/African American clients are the largest group, comprising 35.3% of the total population. The next largest group is non-Hispanic/Latinx white clients, comprising 32.6% of the total population. Table 1 provides a full breakdown of all intersections of race and ethnicity of clients that accessed services recorded in HMIS in 2020.

**Table 1.** Intersections of Race and Ethnicity Among 2020 Homelessness Response System Clients

| Race/Ethnicity Category | Non-Hispanic/Latinx | Hispanic/Latinx | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| White | 32.6% | 22.6% | 55.2% |
| Black/African American | 35.3% | 1.9% | 37.2% |
| Indigenous/Native American | 0.8% | 0.5% | 1.3% |
| Asian | 0.5% | 0.0% | 0.5% |
| Pacific Islander | 0.2% | 0.0% | 0.2% |
| 2+ Races | 4.0% | 1.5% | 5.5% |
| Total | 73.4% | 26.5% | 100% |

Figure 1 shows the difference between proportions of racial and ethnic groups in the population experiencing homelessness and the overall Travis County population[1]. The Black/African American population is not only the only group with a higher proportion among those experiencing homelessness than in the overall population, but also by the largest margin across all groups.

**Figure 1.** Percent of 2020 Clients in Homeless Services by Race and Ethnicity Relative to Overall Travis County Population



**Black/African American** homelessness in Austin/Travis County is characterized by:

- Majority single male household types
- Relative to other racial groups:
    - Higher rates of reported income sources at Coordinated Entry
    - Lower rates of reported survivorship of domestic violence
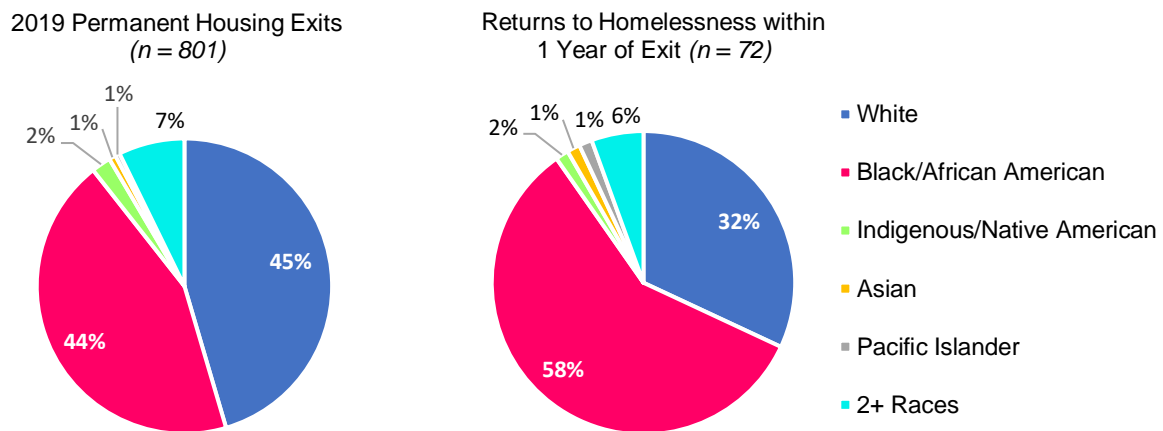    - Lower rates of disabling conditions

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[1] United States Census Bureau 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

* Black/African American and white include Hispanic/Latinx in totals, categories are not mutually exclusive
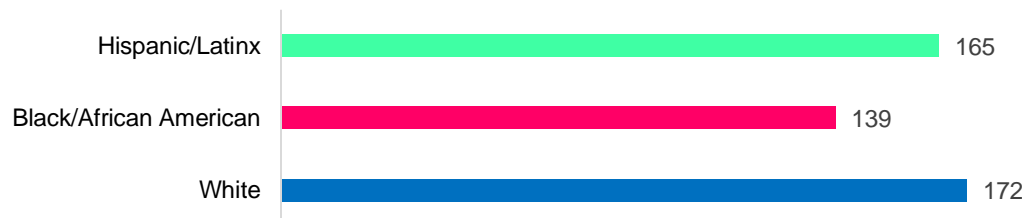
## System Flow Analysis

Black/African American clients who are served by a Permanent Housing program (Rapid Re-Housing or Permanent Supportive Housing – which pair affordable housing with services) in the Homelessness Response System are more likely to leave that program into permanent housing than are white clients. However, Black/African American clients are also more likely to return to homelessness within a year of leaving that program to housing. All communities, based on guidance from HUD, use this important one year benchmark to determine long-term housing stability. Figure 2 shows the difference in the racial composition of clients who exit to permanent housing destinations and clients who returned to homelessness within one year.

**Figure 2.** 2019 Exits to Permanent Housing Destinations and Returns within 1 Year by Race

2019 Permanent Housing Exits *(n = 801)*

Returns to Homelessness within 1 Year of Exit *(n = 72)*

- White
- Black/African American
- Indigenous/Native American
- Asian
- Pacific Islander
- 2+ Races

The data also suggests that Black and Hispanic/Latinx clients who obtained stable housing after participating in a permanent housing program lost their housing and returned to homelessness faster than white clients. Among clients who returned homelessness within one year of exiting from a Permanent Housing program (Rapid Re-Housing or Permanent Supportive Housing) to a permanent housing destination in 2019, Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx clients returned to the system within a shorter period of time (Figure 3). This suggests not only unsustainable housing stability in the long term for non-white and/or Hispanic/Latinx clients, but also in the short term as well.
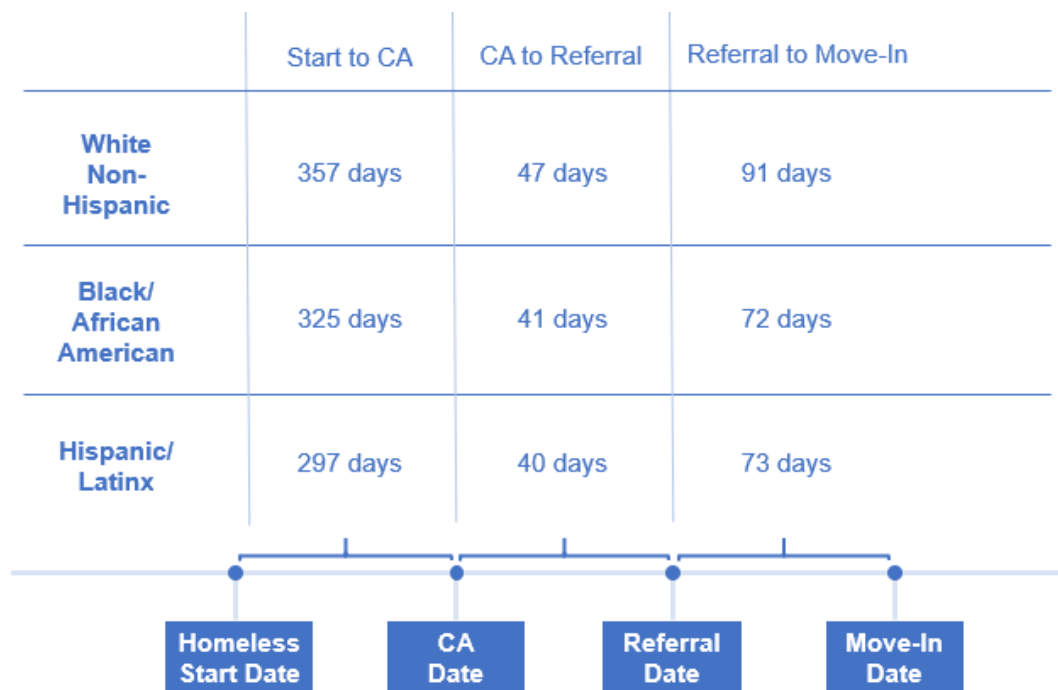
**Figure 3.** Median Days to Return Among Returns to Homelessness Within 1 Year of Exit by Race and Ethnicity Following 2019 Exit to Permanent Housing Destination

| Race/Ethnicity | Median Days |
|---|---|
| Hispanic/Latinx | 165 |
| Black/African American | 139 |
| White | 172 |

System flow to and through Coordinated Entry, the intake and placement system of the Homelessness Response System to permanent housing programs, can also be analyzed on the basis of race and ethnicity. Figure 4 shows that Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx clients experience shorter median durations between 1) the start of their homelessness, 2) the date of their Coordinated Assessment (CA) which is an intake process for permanent housing opportunities, and 3) permanent housing program move-in dates.

This data reveals that Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx clients who access Coordinated Entry move through the process and into their permanent housing program units more quickly overall than do white clients who access Coordinated Entry. The extent to which the total population experiencing homelessness within each racial and ethnic group access Coordinated Entry, however, is unknown. It is possible that Coordinated Entry is not accessible to all who might benefit from enrollment in permanent housing programs. It is also possible that there is a racial or ethnic disparity in accessibility of Coordinated Entry. Data analyzed is limited only to those who access Coordinated Entry.

**Figure 4.** Median Days Between Homelessness Start, Coordinated Assessment (CA), Referral and Move-In by Race and Ethnicity

| | Start to CA | CA to Referral | Referral to Move-In |
|---|---|---|---|
| **White Non-Hispanic** | 357 days | 47 days | 91 days |
| **Black/ African American** | 325 days | 41 days | 72 days |
| **Hispanic/ Latinx** | 297 days | 40 days | 73 days |

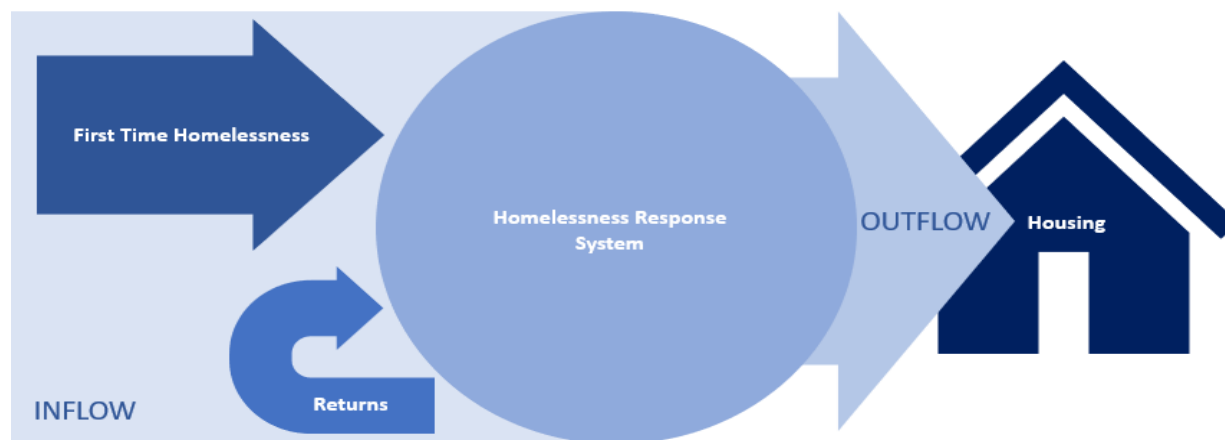Homeless Start Date — CA Date — Referral Date — Move-In Date

Long wait times between each phase of the Coordinated Entry process, regardless of client race/ethnicity, are a symptom of inadequate Homelessness Response System capacity to serve the scale of housing need in Austin/Travis County. Wait times result from a backlog of clients between inflow to

the Coordinated Entry system through CA and outflow to program move in. In order to increase move ins and deplete this client backlog, a significant increase in system capacity is needed[2,3].

Black/African American clients tend to be more successful overall in permanent housing outcomes upon exit from a permanent housing program, and tend to move through the Coordinated Entry system to program move-in more quickly relative to white clients, yet are still drastically overrepresented in the population experiencing homelessness. Historically, the Black/African American population has experienced higher rates of inflow to homelessness relative to other groups. The impact of this high inflow to homelessness for Black/African Americans has not yet been adequately addressed. Until outflow of Black/African American clients to permanent housing exceeds inflow to homelessness for Black/African Americans, the overrepresentation of the Black/African American population among people experiencing homelessness in Austin/Travis County will continue. Inflows include clients returning to the Homelessness Response System and clients experiencing homelessness for the first time (Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Simple Homelessness Response System Flow Model



Black/African American clients are overrepresented in returns to homelessness within a year of exiting a Permanent Housing program to a permanent housing destination, as seen in Figure 2. For the portion of inflows attributed to returns, inflows to homelessness are higher for the Black/African American population.

Returns to homelessness only comprise a very small portion of total inflow, however. A majority of inflow to the Homelessness Response System is for first time homeless clients. Returns alone cannot explain the extent to which Black/African Americans are overrepresented in the population experiencing homelessness, thus the Black/African American population is likely also be overrepresented in total first time inflows to homelessness.

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[2] Barbara Poppe and Associates. (2020). Investing for Results: Priorities and Recommendations for a Systems Approach to End Homelessness, Recommendations for the City of Austin by Barbara Poppe and Associates.
[3] Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO). (2021). TX-503 Austin/Travis County 2021 Needs and Gaps.

## Addressing Racial Disparities

Racial disparities in inflows to homelessness in Austin/Travis County must be addressed in order to equitably serve the Black/African American population in the community. Inflows to homelessness can be prevented with programs and policies that target risk factors for homelessness. These risk factors can be better understood by looking to community level data by geographic area.

In the literature on homelessness there has historically been a lack of attention to systems-level factors contributing to homelessness. Rather, homelessness has been portrayed as a symptom or result of personal failures, unfortunate circumstances, and family dysfunction. This narrow focus primarily on the personal, individual-level contributors to homelessness neglects the glaring systemic drivers of homelessness and overlooks an opportunity to address such drivers with data-driven policy and programs. Often, causes of homelessness that seem to be on the individual level stem from deeper, systemic trends that extend far beyond the individual[4].

Table 2 shows community level indicators of risk of homelessness by Travis County census tract, including median values for all census tracts, for census tracts with higher proportions of the population that are Black/African American, and for census tracts with lower proportions of the population that are Black/African American, respectively[5,6,7,8].

**Table 2.** Median Values of Community Level Indicators of Homelessness Risk, By Census Tract

|  | Median Pop. Size | % Black/Af. American | Median Income | % Rent Burdened | % Over-crowded rentals | Annual eviction rate | % Census Tracts Potentially gentrifying | % W/o health insurance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Higher proportion Black/Af. American pop.** | 5,514 | 10.0% | $59,401 | 31.8% | 2.4% | 2.0% | 46.2% | 25.7% |
| **Lower proportion Black/Af. American pop.** | 4,522 | 1.8% | $80,813 | 28.7% | 0% | 0.8% | 30.6% | 13.3% |
| **All Travis County** | 4,794 | 4.9% | $68,769 | 29.6% | 1.0% | 1.4% | 38.1% | 18.1% |

In Travis County, census tracts with higher proportions of the population that are Black/African American have heightened levels of all community-level homelessness risk factors analyzed: lower

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[4] Fargo, J.D., Munley, E.A., Byrne, T.H., Montgomery, A.E., Culhane, D.P. (2013). Community-Level Characteristics Associated with Variation in Rates of Homelessness Among Families and Single Adults. *American Journal of Public Health.*

[5] United States Bureau 2018 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

[6] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2019 National Health Interview Survey

[7] Eviction Lab 2016 Eviction Rate Data

[8] Potentially gentrifying census tracts are defined as those with (1) The percent of the housing stock in the Census tract that is older than 30 years old is higher than that percent in all of Travis county, and (2) Median income in a Census tract is below the median of the county.

median income, higher rates of rent burden, overcrowded rental units, higher eviction rates, higher likelihood of gentrification, and lower rates of health insurance. Black/African American people in Austin/Travis County are likely to be at higher risk of falling into homelessness than any other racial or ethnic group.

## Staffing Considerations

Systems that are demographically representative of the population they serve are better equipped to actively represent the needs and interests of the population. Gaps in demographic representation can reveal root causes for inequitable outcomes among clients served by systems[9]. To assess the representativeness of the racial and ethnic composition of Austin/Travis County Homelessness Response System staff to the clients receiving homeless services from the system, in November-December 2020 we conducted a voluntary, anonymous staff web survey to collect staff race and ethnicity data. In the survey, we did not collect any identifying information from respondents, and provided "I do not wish to disclose" response options for all questions.

We shared the survey to a contact list of all partners in the Austin/Travis County Homelessness Response System, with a request to distribute the survey to all full-time staff and board members of their organizations. Participation was voluntary, and the response rate was low (n = 213) relative to the number of system staff with access to HMIS. The total number of staff in the Homelessness Response System is unknown, as not all staff have access to HMIS, thus we do not know what proportion of the overall staff we received survey responses from. We cannot assume that the sample of staff that responded to the survey are necessarily representative of all staff in the system.

Figures 6 and 7 show the difference in the racial and ethnic composition of Austin/Travis County Homelessness Response System staff by role type in the system. Staff in non-leadership roles are most likely to be non-white and/or Hispanic/Latinx, and staff in executive and board roles are least likely to be non-white and/or Hispanic/Latinx. Similarly, staff in direct service roles are more likely to be non-white and/or Hispanic/Latinx than those in roles that are not in direct service to clients.

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[9] Bishu, S. and Kennedy, A. (2019). Trends and Gaps: A Meta-Review of Representative Bureaucracy. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*.

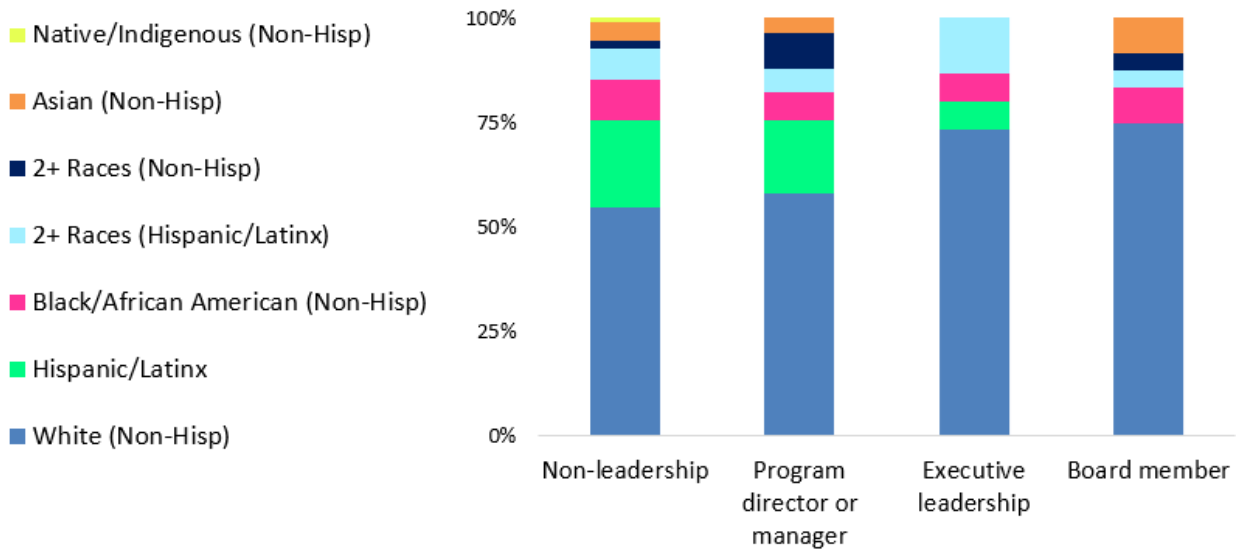**Figure 6.** 2020 Homelessness Response System Staff Roles by Race and Ethnicity



Legend:
- Native/Indigenous (Non-Hisp)
- Asian (Non-Hisp)
- 2+ Races (Non-Hisp)
- 2+ Races (Hispanic/Latinx)
- Black/African American (Non-Hisp)
- Hispanic/Latinx
- White (Non-Hisp)

Categories: Non-leadership, Program director or manager, Executive leadership, Board member

**Figure 7.** 2020 Homelessness Response System Staff Service Levels by Race and Ethnicity



Legend:
- Native/Indigenous (Non-Hisp)
- Asian (Non-Hisp)
- 2+ Races (Non-Hisp)
- 2+ Races (Hispanic/Latinx)
- Black/African American (Non-Hisp)
- Hispanic/Latinx
- White (Non-Hisp)

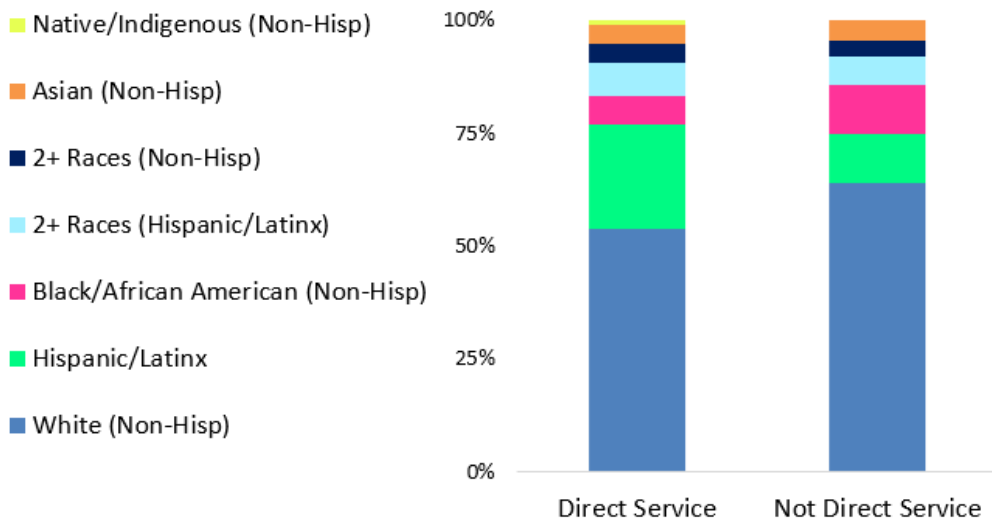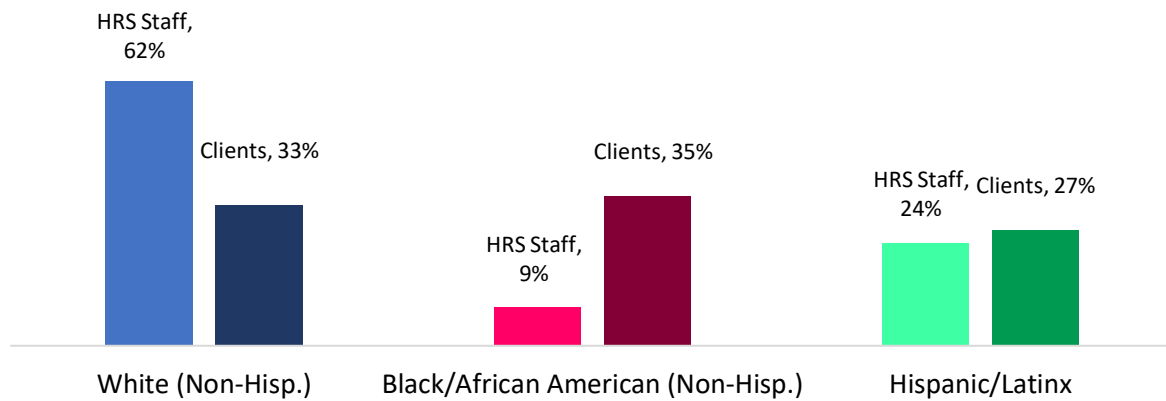Categories: Direct Service, Not Direct Service

Figure 8 shows the difference in the racial and ethnic composition of the Homelessness Response System staff and the clients served by the system. The Austin/Travis County Homelessness Response System staff are disproportionately white when compared to the client population served. The Black/African American population is especially underrepresented among system staff.

**Figure 8.** Comparison of 2020 Homelessness Response System Staff vs. 2020 Clients by Race and Ethnicity



The Austin/Travis County Homelessness Response System staff are not representative of the population served, as per the results of our 2020 staff survey. Non-white and/or Hispanic/Latinx clients, particularly Black/African American clients, are underrepresented among system staff overall. Underrepresentation of non-white and/or Hispanic/Latinx clients is most stark among staff in leadership roles. Based on our 2020 survey, Homelessness Response System staff in positions of power such as executive or board member roles are over 75% white non-Hispanic, whereas only 33% of clients receiving homeless services in 2020 were white non-Hispanic.

Representation of non-white and/or Hispanic/Latinx clients among system staff is a gap remaining in addressing racial disparities in the Austin/Travis County Homelessness Response System. Known inequities in inflow to homelessness for the non-white and/or Hispanic/Latinx population in Austin/Travis County could be better addressed by staff in decision making roles that are representative of the population in need of dedicated service.

## Ongoing Community Efforts

The Equity Task Group of the Austin/Travis County TX-503 Continuum of Care (CoC) has been addressing racial disparities in homelessness outcomes and system flow since its establishment in 2019 as a part of the CoC governance structure. The mission of the CoC Equity Task Group is to "eliminate racial disparities within the Homelessness Response System, and to address the intersections of marginalization of groups that would not be served equitably without explicit focus." The group reports to the Leadership Council, the CoC Board for TX-503.

From fall 2020 to spring 2021, Austin/Travis County participated in the first ever cohort of the HUD Racial Equity Demonstration Project. The goal that the Austin/Travis County community set in the project is being absorbed by the CoC Equity Task Group. In order to tackle all of the steps needed to meet the Project goal, the Equity Task Group has adopted a new work group structure.

| **Racial Equity Demo Project** <br> **Austin/Travis County Goal** <br><br> (1) Improve street outreach to Black unsheltered people experiencing homelessness; and (2) Increase access to the Homelessness Response System for Black unsheltered people experiencing homelessness. | **Equity Task Group** <br> **2021 Work Group Structure** <br><br> • Outreach & Engagement <br> • Policy & Procedure <br> • Training & Continued Education <br> • Tools (Data Collection) |
| --- | --- |

The Equity Task Group has outlined the following steps to meet the Racial Equity Demonstration Project Austin/Travis County Goal:

- Conducting focus groups with unsheltered Black/African American people experiencing homelessness to investigate access gaps,

- Building connections to local unaffiliated agencies and other resources utilized by Black/African American people experiencing homelessness,

- Identifying access gaps in existing street outreach systems,

- Developing an intentional street outreach plan to fill gaps in access,

- Revamping data entry training for street outreach providers, and

- Developing street outreach policies that center racial equity.

In August 2021, the Leadership Council approved the adoption of the Austin Prioritization Index (API), a locally developed assessment tool for the Austin/Travis County Coordinated Entry System, proposed to the Leadership Council by the Equity Task Group. The API was developed over a year of piloting and analysis led by the Tools Subcommittee of the Equity Task Group. The intention behind the API is to capture the vulnerabilities experienced by Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, and transgender/gender non-conforming clients entering the Homelessness Response System. The API will be continuously monitored by the Equity Task Group, and recommendations for improvements to the tool will be proposed to the Leadership Council as they arise.

## Steps Forward

Prevention of both first time homelessness and returns to homelessness are essential for addressing racial disparities in Austin/Travis County. Overrepresentation of the Black/African American community among people experiencing homelessness cannot be adequately addressed without specific focus on preventing inflows to homelessness for this population. To understand inflows to homelessness, a cross-systems approach is needed, from the community level up.

The Austin/Travis County Homelessness Response System would be better equipped to tackle racial disparities if the system staff racial/ethnic composition more closely reflected the composition of the population of people experiencing homelessness. System staff are not currently representative of the

population served. All agencies in the Austin/Travis County Homelessness Response System, including ECHO, share the responsibility of recruiting, hiring, and promoting staff that are representative of the population served, especially into leadership and other decision-making roles which are currently dominated by white staff. The system network must also be expanded to include agencies that are already led by and comprised of non-white staff into the official Homelessness Response System structure.

The path toward further addressing racial disparities in the Austin/Travis County Homelessness Response System requires partnership and collaboration as a community across systems and agencies. Together, our community can reach a point at which homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring, and at which race does not predict homelessness or outcomes for clients following Homelessness Response System involvement.