

# When Housing Homeless Older Adults, Race Matters

Research into Action | Project #1

The number of older adults experiencing homelessness is on the rise. One Research Into Action team (Jared N. Schachner, PhD; Gary D. Painter, PhD; and Steven Schmidt, PhD) aimed to help the homeless services field better understand how its efforts impact this age group. Using Los Angeles as an example, they examined the risk of future homelessness among housing insecure older adults varies based on placement into emergency shelter, Rapid Re-Housing (RRH), or Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH).

PSH and RRH, which pair housing subsidies with voluntary supportive services, are **proven interventions** that end homelessness. Despite these programs' success, the federal government has never provided enough resources to meet the level of need in this country. In fact, shockingly few people experiencing homelessness will be given a chance to access these housing placements. As communities look to increase the availability of PSH and RRH, it is helpful to understand how these interventions may impact people of varying ages, races, and ethnicities to ensure these programs meet everyone's needs.

**Ultimately, the researchers found that older adults benefit from PSH and RRH more than younger people, which was especially true for people who identify as Black and American Indian/Native American.**

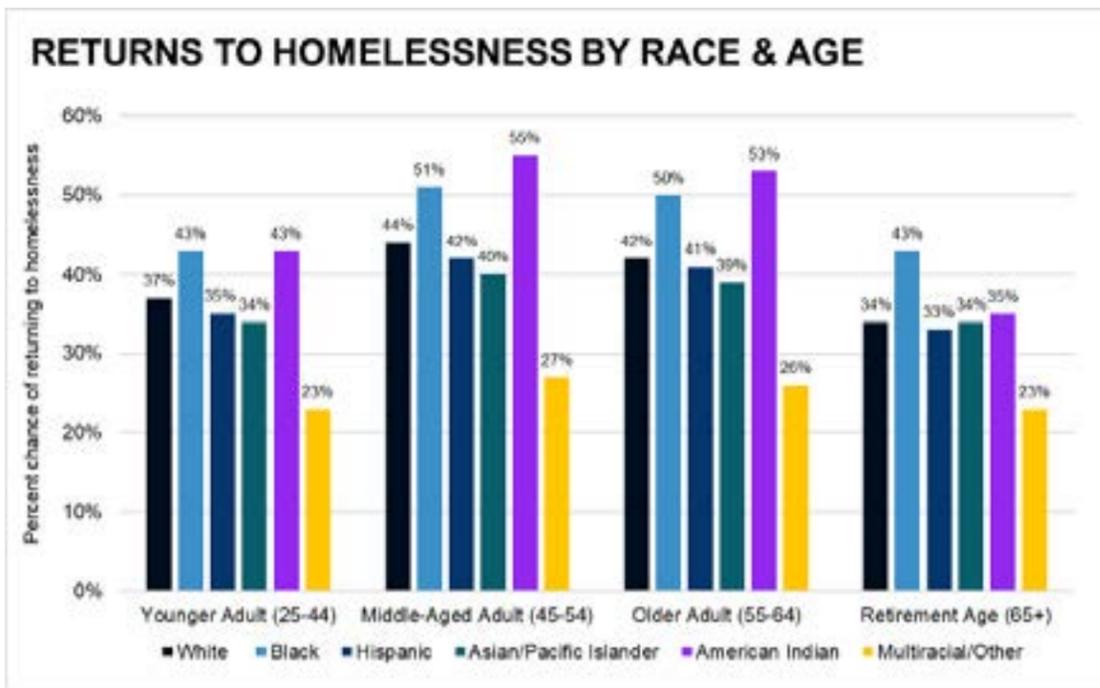
## Key Takeaways

### Age and Race Shape Risk of Returning to Homelessness

The researchers analyzed nearly a decade's worth of Los Angeles County homelessness data on adults ages 25 and older, drawn from the local Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). They found that **as housing insecure people grow older, their risk of returning to homelessness generally increases**. Further, across all age groups, Black and American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) people face a higher risk of returning to homelessness than White people of similar ages.

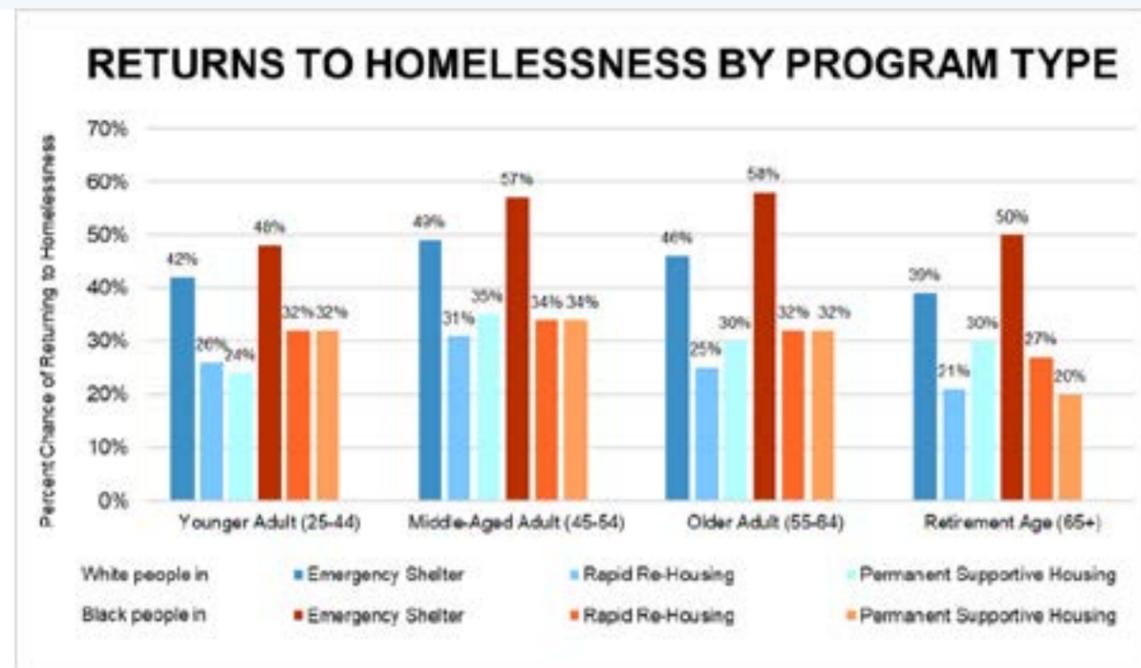
Subsequently, individuals who are both older and a person of color face particularly high risk of returning to homelessness. The gap in risk between Black and White adults is largest for older and retirement aged adults.

Racial disparities in who is homeless are rooted in the lasting impacts of racist policies and practices in housing, employment, the criminal legal system, healthcare, and other systems that they interact with throughout their lives.



## Permanent Housing Programs Decrease the Likelihood of Returning to Homelessness, Especially for Black Older Adults

When compared to people in temporary shelter, those in permanent housing (either PSH or RRH) have a **significantly decreased risk of returning to homelessness**. This gap between the two groups is large (often around 20 percentage points) and holds true across races/ethnicities and age groups.



But PSH and RRH decrease the risk of future homelessness for Black older adults more than for White older adults. **For example, Black adults over 65 had a 50% chance of experiencing future homelessness after receiving emergency shelter, but those in PSH had a 20% chance.** That is a striking 30 percentage point drop in risk of future homelessness among Black adults over 65—compared to a 9 percentage point drop for their White counterparts.

## Experiences in PSH Depend on Placement Type

To help understand their data findings, the researchers interviewed 40 older adults in PSH in Los Angeles. White residents interviewed were more likely to tell stories of how their neighborhood preferences (sometimes rooted in racist views of various Los Angeles neighborhoods) shaped their PSH placement, including location and available services.

These conversations may help explain the researchers' finding that **White older adults in PSH were more frequently in certain scattered-site locations, often with fewer services options than place-based PSH**. These placements (possibly tied to resident or system worker expectations of where White people should live or would be willing to live) may contribute to racial differences in returns to homelessness among older adults. However, future research should explore other factors: for example, why place-based PSH developments are often located in low-income neighborhoods; the impacts of Coordinated Entry policies and procedures that inform housing placement decisions; and racial disparities in housing opportunities (i.e., Black people may have to make PSH work for them if other housing options are limited).

With the exception of some White PSH residents, **most interviewees lacked understanding of (or agency over) their enrollment in PSH at all**, let alone a particular program or location placement. Black residents seemed more resigned to the reality that they had limited choice in where they would live. Some felt pressure to exit, including by property managers, though Black residents expressed more hesitancy to move from PSH. It is also important to note that the types of services offered in PSH and their availability varied widely, particularly in scattered-site PSH. Meanwhile, residents in place-based PSH valued receiving more readily available care, such as through an on-site nurse.

## Learn more and read the full report:

[Assessing Heterogeneity in Homelessness Risk and Housing First Supports' Effectiveness by Race and Ethnicity among Older Adults Experiencing Homelessness: Evidence from Los Angeles County](#)

## Implications: Research Into Action

When compared to people in temporary shelter, those in permanent housing (either PSH or RRH) have a **significantly decreased risk of returning to homelessness**. This gap between the two groups is large (often around 20 percentage points) and holds true across races/ethnicities and age groups.

- **There is a critical need for more PSH and RRH:** First, there is a clear need for more available housing units. Of the temporary and permanent housing placements offered to unhoused people during the studied period, only 2% were PSH and 10% were RRH, meaning the vast majority of people experiencing homelessness will never benefit from these interventions. Everyone who needs such housing should have access to it.
- **More PSH and RRH could promote racial equity:** PSH and RRH promote racial equity by drastically reducing racial disparities in returns to homelessness and in homelessness more generally.
- **Increased urgency around efforts to ensure fair access:** Some approaches to deciding PSH and RRH placements have disproportionately excluded Black people and other people of color. This is unfortunate since, according to this study, these programs effectively reduce risk among these groups. Systems get less bang for their buck (i.e., smaller overall impacts from existing investments) from unfairly limiting housing access to people of color. This study thus underscores the importance of developing coordinated entry tools and procedures that promote fair and equitable access to PSH and RRH.
- **Applying a [targeted universalism approach](#)—which recognizes that group-specific strategies can help everyone reach a universal goal—could further improve outcomes:** Applying a racial lens to key questions can help to better serve everyone, regardless of race. For instance, service providers and researchers could identify what factors cause PSH and RRH to have less of an impact on White participants. Would certain changes improve this group's outcomes? Why are housing interventions working particularly well for Black and AIAN people? Can identifying and enhancing those factors lead to even better results for those groups?
- **Shorter-term interventions can reduce homelessness too:** These researchers' results bolster support for RRH, which costs less than PSH but also appears to reduce returns to homelessness among all age groups, including older and retirement-age adults.
- **The quality of PSH and RRH varies:** The researchers found that improvements in program quality coincide with decreased risk of returns to homelessness. Practitioners and researchers can take steps to understand local variations in program quality, such as by documenting differences in housing, services offered, and demonstrated outcomes. They can then work to increase effectiveness across program types and design policies to match people with a program that is a good fit for them.
- **Future research should build on this study to further understand causes of negative exits from PSH:** Although the benefits of PSH and RRH are striking for those who can access these programs, there is a need to understand why a relatively large group in Los Angeles still face repeated homelessness after receiving them. More can be done to understand other results from this study, as well, including evaluating the influence of Coordinated Entry policies and the impact of different measures of program quality on future homelessness risk. Another Research Into Action project is investigating these questions (findings forthcoming).