

Context

In the fall of 2024, the Alliance's Homelessness Research Institute (HRI) partnered with seven experts — six with lived experience of homelessness who currently worked in the homelessness response system and one homeless services leader who shapes his community's efforts to hire people with lived experience (PWLE) — to design two national surveys. One survey was targeted to current and former workers in the homeless response system who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness, while the other survey went to people who lead organizations and systems working to end homelessness.

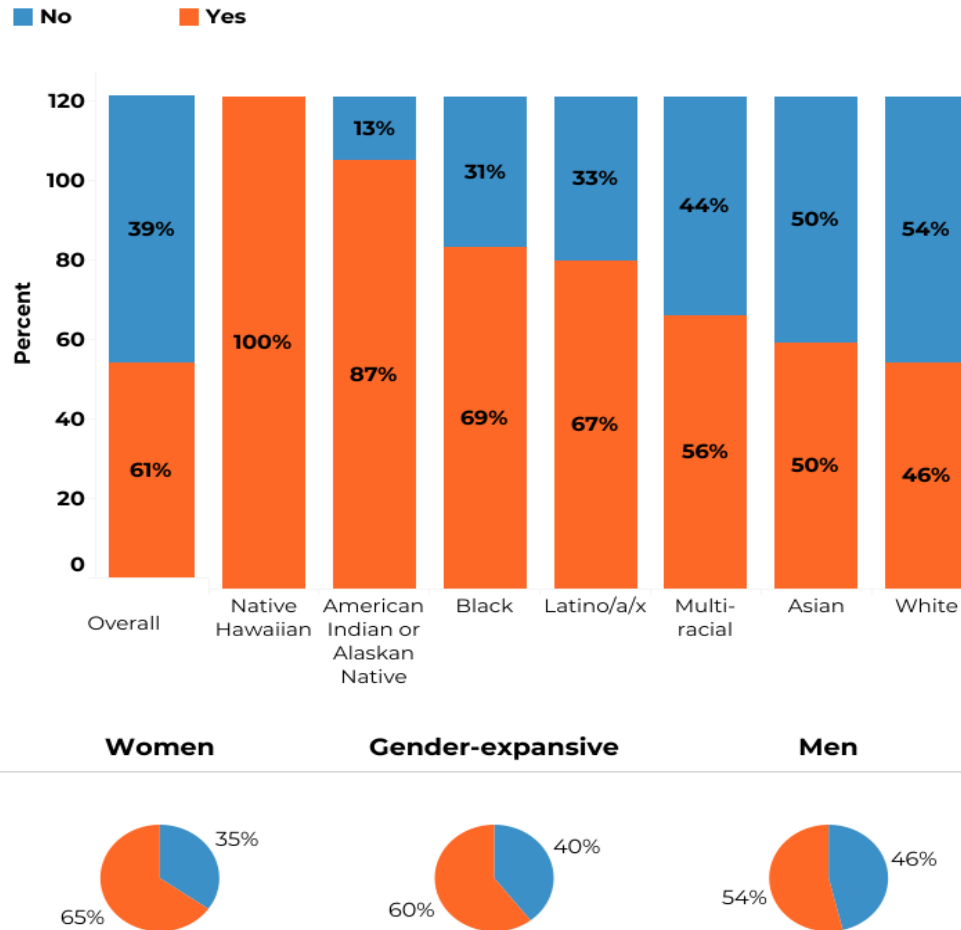
The responses were analyzed and consolidated into a published series of [essays](#) highlighting trends in how homeless response systems across the United States engage with PWLE workers. The findings demonstrate that [despite the impacts](#) that PWLE workers have on ending homelessness, they also face systemic [challenges](#) that make it difficult for them to stay in their roles. This publication builds on these previous analyses to explore how the severity of these challenges differ by PWLE workers' race and gender.

The expanded findings are undeniable; PWLE, specifically workers of Color and women, report the most significant financial hardships compared to others working in homelessness response systems. Despite making [important contributions](#) to ending homelessness, they struggle to pay for the things they need and are more likely to work multiple jobs to keep up with the cost of living.

An Unstable Workforce Threatens the Homeless Response System

Insufficient pay makes the sector’s efforts to end homelessness far more difficult. Large surveys of the US workforce indicate that [women](#) and [gender-expansive workers](#), as well as [Black and Hispanic workers](#), make significantly less than white workers doing the same job. This pattern is not unique to the homelessness services sector; it is also [apparent](#) among other human service professionals in similar fields.

"Do You Currently Work Multiple Jobs Out of Financial Necessity?"

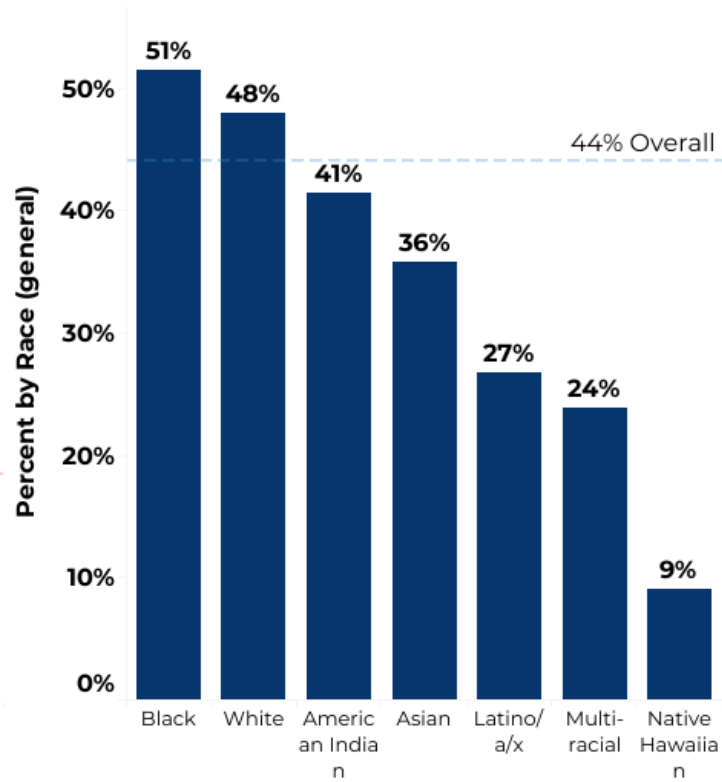
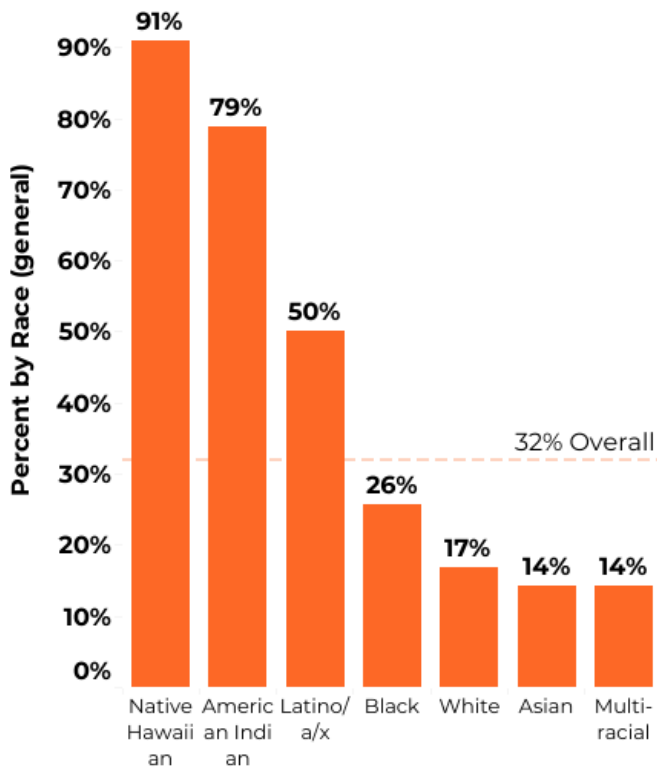


Many groups of Color are overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness, making it essential that homeless response programs are staffed with workers who are equipped to understand and respond to their specific experiences. This is impossible if these workers are not paid enough to survive. For many PWLE workers of Color, switching to more highly paid positions within the sector – or leaving the sector altogether – are the only ways to make ends meet.

"If I do not make more money in the next year, I will..."

Leave the homeless response system for a different career

Try and change to a different role in the homeless response system that pays more



However, PWLE workers and PWLE workers of Color are less represented in positions with higher pay. Meeting the requirements for these roles, like higher education or licensure, can require significant amounts of money. Additionally, stigma about their expertise or experience can also limit their ability to advance into leadership roles. These barriers make it more challenging for PWLE workers to earn a living wage and may force them to leave the sector, ultimately weakening the system's impact by making it harder for PWLE workers to shape efforts to end homelessness. When people from a range of backgrounds and experiences are represented in a variety of roles, programs and policies better reflect unhoused people's needs.

Leadership Roles Are **Less Accessible** to Workers of Color, Women and Gender-Expansive Workers

While frontline work is foundational to ending homelessness, organizations need diverse decision-makers who represent the people they serve

	Director/ Leadership	Outreach or Shelter Staff	Case Management	Lived Expertise Advisor/Board	Data or Policy Analyst
American Indian	4%	62%	6%	8%	20%
Black	7%	48%	14%	18%	12%
White	12%	36%	25%	22%	5%
Asian		43%	21%	7%	29%
Multi-racial	10%	29%	17%	42%	2%
Gender-expansive	7%	47%	27%	16%	3%
Men	11%	41%	21%	19%	7%
Women	9%	44%	19%	19%	10%

Workers Want Opportunities to Advance in Their Field

Regardless of their role, the sector's workforce deserves a living wage. Organizations need financial resources **to help avoid worker turnover and support their employees' career development.** In addition to higher pay, many PWLE respondents (across all demographic groups) want more professional development and mentorship, including spaces to build relationships with other workers who have also experienced homelessness. Facilitating these opportunities can help retain workers and ensure they have what they need to continuously improve their work.

“I wish the place I work or volunteer would start doing the following to help me feel supported as a worker with lived expertise of homelessness:”



Conclusion

Beyond the LEARN surveys, the Alliance’s research indicates [widespread economic hardship](#) among workers in the homeless response system—regardless of whether they have experienced homelessness. Policymakers who are interested in ending homelessness need to take this hardship seriously and fund frontline organizations appropriately, allowing them to adequately pay and train their workers. Doing so would help to correct the specific challenges that PWLE and PWLE of Color face in the sector while also making it possible for all workers to thrive, reach their full potential, and provide the best possible services to clients.

For more specific recommendations, the Alliance has published multiple materials related to the sector’s workforce, including recommendations policy and practice: <https://endhomelessness.org/expanding-the-workforce/>