



USC Homelessness Policy Research Institute

Workforce Re-Entry Barriers for Black Angelenos with Lived-Experience of Homelessness

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Black Angelenos experiencing homelessness face additional barriers compared to White Angelenos in education, employment, healthcare, the criminal justice system, and housing opportunities. The inequitable access to social services and the prominence of racial discrimination are significant factors in the inadequacy of employment opportunities for those Black Angelenos with lived experience of homelessness. While this brief will focus on employment barriers, it is imperative to understand the interconnected nature of these areas and the significant role institutional racism plays in the disproportionate overrepresentation of Black Angelenos experiencing homelessness.

Although Black Angelenos represent only 8% of the LA County population, they account for 31% of the total population experiencing homelessness (LAHSA 2023). Institutional racism and racially discriminatory practices have made critical impacts on the severe over-representation of Black Angelenos experiencing homelessness. In attempting to reduce the rate of homelessness in LA County, consistent and sustainable employment is an important factor to prevent those with lived experience from re-entering housing insecurity or homelessness. By identifying and understanding employment barriers for those with lived experience, decision-makers can shape policy to address the key areas where improvements are needed.

Despite these workforce obstacles, many Angelenos experiencing homelessness actively seek employment opportunities and economic advancement. Their lived experience provides them with unique insights and knowledge that could greatly benefit the Los Angeles County workforce.

Employment-Related Barriers Facing Black Angelenos

Racial Discrimination and Unequal Opportunities for Employment

Throughout history and in the present day, Black Angelenos have faced significant challenges in obtaining employment. Research suggests that workplace discrimination based on race, color, sex, national origin, and religion, while prohibited in law, remains significant (Kline, Rose, and Walters 2021). Barriers including discriminatory hiring practices, unequal access to job opportunities, and discriminatory policies and practices within companies have hindered the ability of many Black Angelenos to find and sustain employment in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles follows the national trend of structural barriers to employment opportunities and a deficit of quality jobs for people of color (Brown 2020; Shakesprere, Katz, and Loprest 2021). In Los Angeles County, racial disparities are prevalent in the unemployment rate as 8% of African Americans are unemployed, compared to the average of 5% (Economic Policy Institute 2024). We also know that workers of color have lower pay (Brown 2020), less access to employment benefits (Kristal, Cohen, and Navot 2018), worse working conditions than white workers (Storer, Schneider, and Harknett 2020), and fewer advancement opportunities (Wilson and Roscigno 2016). Employment discrimination also affects job searching, as Black applicants are only half as likely as equally qualified white applicants to receive a job offer, and Black applicants are less likely to be hired for a job than an equally educated white applicant due to systemic biases in hiring practices (Pager 2009). Reports display a 50% gap in resume callback rates between applicants with Black and white-associated names (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Research findings suggest that even companies with organization-wide diversity statements are no less likely to discriminate based on race during the hiring process than companies with no diversity statements (Kang et al., 2016). Black people experiencing homelessness face extra barriers of employment discrimination when pursuing employment and economic opportunities that could help to lift them out of housing insecurity and homelessness. Although those with lived experience have extensive work histories and are seeking employment opportunities, Black Angelenos with lived experience are struggling to get hired for jobs that pay livable wages, provide benefits, and offer opportunities for advancement.

Mental Health and Physical Health Barriers

Factors of discrimination and lack of access to adequate housing, education, and health care contribute to racial disparities in healthcare outcomes that adversely impact Black Angelenos experiencing homelessness. Dr. Barbara Ferrer, the Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health has stated, "Average life expectancies in communities within LA County are powerfully influenced by social, economic, and environmental conditions within that community and by larger societal conditions" (LA County Department of Public Health 2023). In Los Angeles County, the average life expectancy for Black residents is 6.5 years below the county average, while the life expectancy for those experiencing homelessness is 12 years below the average (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health 2023). Across the United States, there are stark racial inequities in access to health insurance and overall health care, with Black Americans less likely to have health insurance and less access to treatment (Young 2020).

Poor physical health is a major cause of homelessness and a prominent barrier to sustainable employment opportunities for those with lived experiences of homelessness. Many employment problems arise due to health conditions causing people to miss time from work, exhaust their sick leave, and be unable to maintain a regular schedule or perform work duties (National Health Care for the Homeless Council 2019). Access to affordable health insurance has positive effects on obtaining and maintaining employment, while being in poor health is associated with a significant increase in the risk of job loss (Antonisse and Garfield 2018). Without the ability to perform expected work functions, many individuals will lose their jobs and that loss of income could be an event that causes them to fall into housing insecurity or homelessness. The inaccessible and inadequate system of American health insurance and care is failing to keep Black Americans healthy, in turn impacting their ability to stay employed and stably housed.

Disabilities further contribute to becoming homeless when the health condition becomes too severe to maintain stable housing and employment. Persons living in shelters are more than twice as likely to have a disability than the general population (U.S. Housing and Urban Development 2020). Rates of conditions such as HIV/AIDS, heart disease, and diabetes are found to be up to six times greater in those experiencing homelessness (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2023). The diagnosis and treatment of disabling conditions, and other health challenges, are often costly which can also contribute to financial and housing instability.

Medical debt is a significant contributor to experiencing homelessness as more than 60% of U.S. bankruptcies are linked to medical causes (Himmelstein, Lawless, et al. 2019). Common causes of medical bankruptcy include hospital bills, prescription drug costs, doctors' bills, insurance premiums, and income loss from illness (Sugden 2012). Disproportionately high rates of medical debt are faced by Black Americans, and medical debt is a key contributor to foreclosure and racial disparities in homeownership (Lichtenstein et al. 2016). Those with medical debt report making significant trade-offs to pay their medical bills, including foregoing necessities such as food, rent, and heat, while also being at risk of bankruptcy. Findings from a 2007 study researching the association between medical debt and its effects on low-income families' ability to own, rent, and maintain their homes found that 25% of respondents stated their medical debt led to housing problems (Saint Louis University 2007). This relationship has been observed in recent national polls (Lopes et al., 2022) and in samples in major cities like Seattle (Bielenberg et al., 2020).

Mental health issues are also a significant barrier to employment for those with lived experiences of homelessness. Poor mental health is an influential indicator of risk and duration of employment, and the status of mental health is a reliable predictor of time spent unemployed (Butterworth, Leach, Pirkis, and Kelaher 2012). In LA County, about 25% of those experiencing homelessness have severe mental illnesses and 35% have long-term substance use disorders (LA County Public Health 2021). Poor mental health has consequences for employment opportunities and increases the risk factor of experiencing job loss (Butterworth, Leach, Pirkis, and Kelaher 2012). To best lead a stable life with employment, those Black Angelenos experiencing homelessness need support in managing their mental health needs through consistent access to professional mental health care.

Education and Income Barriers

Barriers for those Black Angelenos with lived experiences of homelessness extend further. Those with higher education have greater earnings and lower rates of unemployment compared to those with less educational attainment, another group BIPOC individuals are overrepresented (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023). Persons with lived experience of homelessness may also find it difficult to compete in the job market with a lack of desired career and educational development opportunities and are therefore more likely to struggle to support themselves financially. Entry-level positions that are well-compensated are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, and the cost of college education has become disproportionately unaffordable to Black students that are experiencing a significant gap between college costs and available resources (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2023). In present-day LA County, Black Angelenos have the lowest high school graduation rates (73.5%) and are 22 percentage points less likely than their White and Asian counterparts to receive a college degree (United Way of Los Angeles 2023). Black Angelenos have the lowest household income and on average earn \$20,000 less than the median household income. These barriers create additional vulnerability in Black communities as 29% of Black Angelenos live below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line and two-thirds are rent-burdened (American Community Survey 2023). Additionally, Black Angelenos represent the highest unemployment rate in LA County at 8% (Economic Policy Institute). These intertwined inequities are key feeders into housing instability and homelessness, and together represent many of the reasons that so many Black Angelenos continue to experience homelessness.

Additional Barriers

Those experiencing homelessness may find it difficult to obtain employment or access needed services due to a lack of valid government identification. Those facing this issue have expressed frustration with the lengthy process required to obtain a social security card, driver's license, or birth certificate, documents that are required for nearly any job application opportunity. Criminal records also place a significant barrier on those with lived experience, as many employers are unwilling to hire individuals with a criminal history, even when those criminal records are for loitering and trespassing due to housing instability. Further legislation must be enacted to assist those experiencing homelessness in obtaining valid government identification and preventing non-violent criminal records from becoming a barrier to employment.

A lack of access to reliable transportation also disproportionately affects lower income communities and those without housing in maintaining stable employment. A study conducted by USC researchers found that car commuters in low-income neighborhoods have about 30 times greater job accessibility than those who take public transportation (Giuliano, Hou, and Shin 2017). Another study found that "Transportation disadvantages can negatively impact access to employment and education opportunities, healthcare, and social services, especially persons of color experiencing homelessness. Cost of transportation, in particular, has been found to prevent individuals' upward mobility out of homelessness." (Murphy 2019). Although reliable transportation is disproportionately inaccessible to those experiencing homelessness, reliable transportation is a foundation necessary to sustain employment.

Currently, the homelessness services workforce of Los Angeles is experiencing a widespread staffing shortage, and the sector is struggling to attract candidates to the workforce. The homelessness services sector is severely understaffed, with a currently estimated 1,349 open positions (KPMG 2022). The hiring rate is unable to compensate for attrition, resulting in recruiting to back-fill, although expanding the sector is necessary for providing the appropriate amount of services to those experiencing homelessness. While the hiring rate is scarcely addressing the workforce gaps caused by attrition, there are opportunities to attract more talent through hiring persons with lived experiences of homelessness.

Policy Considerations

Increasing Homelessness Services Employment Opportunities for Those with Lived Experience of Homelessness

Those with lived experiences of homelessness have a unique set of knowledge, perspectives, and skills that would contribute greatly to the policies, programs, and practices of homelessness and housing services. The ability of workers to understand the challenges of experiencing homelessness cannot be taught or trained, and are often key to building the trust required for unhoused participants to accept services or housing placements. KPMG reports that 19% of the workforce consists of People with Lived Experiences, but states that hiring more people with lived experiences would create developments to meet projected growth needs and provide key knowledge to the industry. KPMG recommended that people with a history of homelessness should account for approximately 33% of jobs in the industry (KPMG 2022). In Los Angeles County, 53% of agencies have no record of hiring persons with lived experience of homelessness into their agency (KPMG 2022). Allowing those with lived expertise to display their talents in the field of homelessness and housing services would assist the industry in serving its greatest needs while providing sustainable job opportunities to keep folks stably employed and housed.

The occupations in the sector experiencing the most shortages are entry-level positions, particularly Case Managers and Outreach Specialists. Those with lived experience have an in-depth understanding of the housing, employment, services, and other resources available that are needed to support those experiencing homelessness. With the appropriate training, formerly unhoused folks can tie their expansive knowledge of the resources and the realities of homelessness to tailor support and build relationships with their clients through Case Management and Outreach. In a survey conducted by KPMG, respondents stated that turnover consisted of a shortage of sufficient training, resources, and career support and development. To better retain workers, employees in these fields state a need for more effective training and career development to deliver quality services to those experiencing homelessness and to build sustaining careers of service. Several critical roles cite the need for key skill development to be integrated into the skills framework: Case Management, Outreach Specialists, Program Managers, and supportive staff.

The inadequacy of career advancement is a main contributor to attrition in homelessness services. Employees do not have a clear understanding of other roles and programs within their agency or

the sector, this leads to an unawareness of available career opportunities. In the previously cited study from KPMG, 44% of respondents stated they did not know of any career advancement opportunities and 41% stated they needed more career support from management (KPMG 2022). Due to new roles only becoming available via promotion or turnover, employees are limited in their career mobility.

Due to unidentified critical skills, training curriculums are not aligned to meet the needs of the future workforce. Curriculums such as De-Escalation, Mental Health Awareness, Self-Care Coping Mechanisms, Empathy, and Job-Specific Training need to be developed in homelessness services. The sector does not currently have an understanding of the critical skills and capabilities needed for their workforce to adequately meet the complex needs of their clients. A defined skills framework and evaluation process would increase role clarity and serve as a framework for increased training. This career skill investment, paired with better retention support could help individuals keep their jobs long-term, seek professional development opportunities, and attain work that provides a livable wage, all while providing better results to end homelessness in Los Angeles.

Employment Pathways

Another potential intervention to increase employment amongst those experiencing homelessness is encouraging alternative employment pathways. Alternative employment pathways are opportunities for those seeking to increase their skills and professional development by addressing the barriers to employment. LA County employment programs such as LA:RISE, Careers for a Cause, and Hire Up provide real work opportunities tied with additional training, professional development, and support services for those experiencing homelessness.

Transitional Jobs

A model that is designed to promote wage-paying jobs promptly that include real work opportunities, skill development, and a network of supportive services. This model is utilized in supporting those with lived experience by transitioning those with the need for employment into jobs with professional development opportunities.

Supported Employment

The model designates individualized placement support to help individuals with lived experience of homelessness, disabilities, and health issues find and maintain employment with livable wages. Rapid entry into the labor market is matched with social support services for the client's needs.

Customized Employment

The model is a person-centered approach for maximizing employment by tailoring job opportunities to the individual's strengths and abilities that employers are seeking. This approach provides a curriculum to its clients that strengthen their skills in literacy and basic education that apply in the context of the job market. Clients supply the agency with lists of their skills and abilities, as well as their barriers to employment. Clients are then assigned lessons to help them understand how to increase their skills and abilities in the workforce.

Adult Education Bridge Programs

The job market expectations for workers are constantly changing as there is an expected growth in jobs that require some postsecondary education and fewer opportunities for those who lack postsecondary education. Bridge programs connect clients with training programs and postsecondary education with basic academic skills. Bridge programs are efficient and flexible in helping their clients understand their individual needs and assisting in learning the skills necessary to compete in the job market.

Sector-Based Training

Sector-based training is utilized to help clients maximize employment opportunities and earning potential in a sector. Hands-on industry and skilled job training programs and educational programs linked to employment opportunities are offered by industry employers and career agencies. The training programs provided by the employers match the learned skills with the in-demand job openings in the industry.

Employment Database for Angelenos with Lived Experience and those Currently Experiencing Homelessness

The creation of a centralized database of available job opportunities could benefit Angelenos with lived experiences of homelessness searching for employment opportunities. This would be particularly impactful in helping to fill the many vacancies in the homelessness services sector, filling those vacancies with individuals with personal understanding of homelessness. Organizations that are seeking to fill positions would post available job opportunities on a centralized database, making it easier for unhoused individuals or supportive service workers to locate said opportunities. Supportive service personnel have a thorough understanding of their client's potential barriers to employment, skills and capabilities, job readiness, and their employment and unemployment history. By having a centralized job board and knowledge of a person's job readiness, supportive personnel can streamline employment support for their clients by helping them identify and apply for positions that are tailored to their strengths.

Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) has created a centralized job board for jobs in the homelessness services sector, but the job board is not consistently updated with new job opportunities and is limited in the scope of employment paths. To capitalize on the centralized job board, there should be more consistently updated job postings from organizations seeking available workers to fill vacant positions with livable wages.

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