

Why do black families make up so much of central Ohio's homeless population?

By *Rita Price* *The Columbus Dispatch* • Monday December 5, 2016 2:30 PM

Nearly three-quarters of families served in Franklin County homeless shelters are black, a share deeply disproportionate to the overall population, which is just 22 percent black.

Local and national advocates for the homeless gathered last week at the King Arts Complex to discuss the disparity and to start what they see as a long overdue conversation about race and housing stability in central Ohio.

"How does that happen? How did all of us in this community allow that to happen?" said Stephanie Hightower, president and CEO of the Columbus Urban League. "We should all be saying, 'There's something wrong.'"

Columbus is among 10 U.S. cities joining a project on racism and homelessness led by the Center for Social Innovation, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit group that focuses on public-health issues. The aim is to use data analysis, training and community discussion to develop a plan for new strategies to address the imbalance.

"We cannot afford the consequences of inaction," said Jason Reece, an assistant professor at Ohio State University who studies race and ethnicity in cities. "We see prosperity and inequality growing side by side."

The roots of such problems reach deep into the histories of Columbus and other U.S. cities.

"Racism has been embedded in housing policy and, I would argue, is the foundation of our housing policy," Reece said. "The inequities in our community today were by design."

Black families, for example, were kept from moving to many areas in central Ohio decades ago through redlining, a now-illegal practice in which mortgage lenders and real-estate developers marked off neighborhoods where they wouldn't make loans or sell homes to African-Americans.

Cities struggle with the legacies of discriminatory credit practices, prejudice in private and subsidized rental housing, exclusionary zoning and freeway development that choked off neighborhoods. Inequities in transportation access, jobs and wages, gentrification and wildly disparate incarceration rates also are enduring problems, advocates say.

"Homelessness is a symptom of all that other stuff," said Jeff Olivet, president and CEO of the Center for Social Innovation.

Reluctance to acknowledge some of the fallout from racist policies blocks paths to improvement, Olivet and others said.

Hightower said she recently spoke with a civic leader who said he wanted to help with awareness about homelessness disparity but worried that people would be "offended" by the message.

Reece said he was in a closed-door meeting with a local suburban leader who said "nobody with Section 8 needs to come to my community."

"My response was, 'Who do you think is working in your community?'"

Some recent national studies have found high rates of economic segregation among Columbus-area neighborhoods when compared with other metro areas.

In the local homeless system, 64 percent of men in shelters are black and 34 percent white, according to recent data from the Community Shelter Board. Among women in shelters,

62 percent are black and 36 percent white. The disparity is highest in family shelters, where 73 percent of those served are black.

"I have seen generational homelessness," said James Alexander, executive director of homeless programs at Maryhaven, a local behavioral-health and treatment center. "That lets me know that we have a long way to go to make this right."

The shelter board, local Urban League and United Way of Central Ohio are sponsoring the project with the Center for Social Innovation.

Over the next several months, participants from nonprofit, business and government groups will meet to discuss the overall disparities and zero in on specific problems connected to homelessness, such as Columbus' high eviction rate.

Initial goals and recommendations probably will be developed by September, said shelter-board spokeswoman Sara Loken.

People who have experienced eviction and homelessness will have a seat at the table as plans are developed, said Marc Dones of the Center for Social Innovation. Too many forums and studies leave their voices out, he said. "We're not going to do that."

Chad Jester, president of the Nationwide Foundation, said the data on disparity is clear. "The question is how we embrace it and do something about it."

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