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Discrimination and Economic Profiling among the Homeless of Washington, DC

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Introduction

During the fall of 2013, the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) and graduate students of George Washington University's Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration collaborated on researching the extent to which homeless individuals in Washington, D.C. have perceived discrimination as a result of their housing status. The survey tracked other characteristics such as, gender and ethnicity. The Homeless Services Reform Act of 2005 emphasizes the right of the homeless to receive social services, free from discrimination, on the basis of legally protected characteristics listed under the DC Human Rights Act of 1977. Homelessness is also included under the Bias-Related Crime Act of 1989, which provides for increased penalties when crimes are motivated by bias or hate for specific groups including the homeless.

Homeless individuals have long told staff at NCH that they have experienced discrimination related to their housing status despite current legal protections. The survey cannot confirm that discrimination actually happened since our research did not investigate specific incidents, yet it finds that a high percentage of homeless individuals believe they have been discriminated against through similar encounters with law enforcement, private businesses, medical services and social services agencies.



What Is It Like to Be Homeless?

Practically every homeless individual has a story to tell about the humiliation and the stigma that comes from being forced to live in public spaces. Each day brings a range of challenges for people experiencing homelessness, such as obtaining enough food to eat and finding shelter from the weather. Some individuals are confronted with health emergency and life-threatening situations. Other struggle with the isolation of being in a state of crisis - un-housed and destitute - yet seemingly ignored in a bustling city of passers-by who are unconcerned with their plight.

One individual explained that being homeless made you feel “disconnected from the world... people walk by you and not make eye contact with you.” Surviving as a homeless person is a “fulltime job...you have to look for food [and] look for things to do during the day.”

Economic Profiling

“I have been denied service at many businesses.”

Discrimination on the basis of housing status runs throughout the institutions of our society from law enforcement to private businesses, medical and social services. Most participants in the survey strongly felt as if they had been and are discriminated against because they were perceived to be homeless. These testimonies are noteworthy because they do not depict unique and isolated discriminatory acts. Rather, this kind of discrimination is typical in the lives of the homeless people. Here are some comments gathered during the survey from individuals experiencing homelessness:

<p>One individual explains that homelessness can mean being turned away at the door of a “coffee shop... due to my attire, push cart, my extra bags.”</p>	<p>Another individual explained she was told by a DC police officer not to lie down on the bench to sleep, she could only sit up to sleep. She also commented that she felt she was refused care, by local health care providers because the staff thought she was faking to get inside the facility.</p>	<p>“When I got stabbed the paramedic stated that nothing was wrong with me... he said I just wanted to get out of the rain.”</p>
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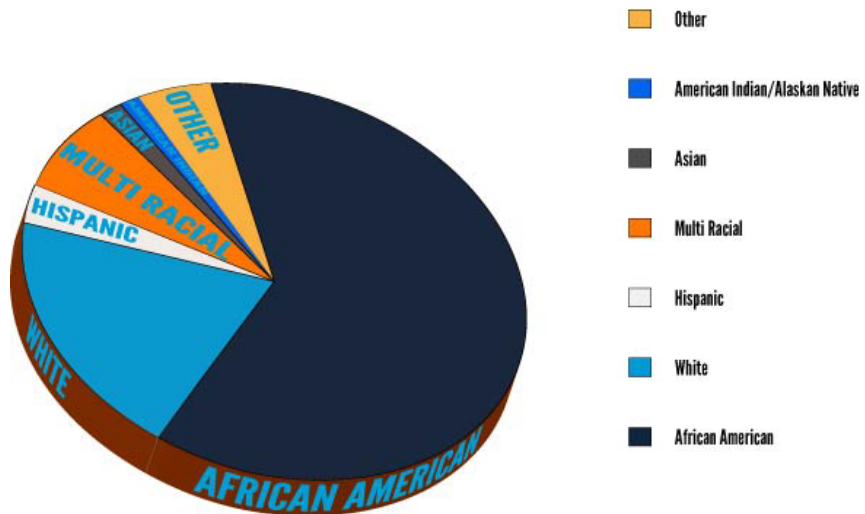
Homeless Discrimination Survey

A total of 142 surveys were collected from 110 men and 32 women, with the goal of learning about the experiences of homeless individuals in Washington, DC. Ages ranged from 20 years to 77 years with a medium age 49.4. The survey reveals that roughly two thirds of homeless individuals have perceived discrimination from law enforcement agencies and private businesses.

	MEDIAN		
Age Distribution	20	49.4	77
Gender Distribution	Women (32)	Men (110)	

Ethnic Distribution of Survey Respondents

- 87 African-American (61.3 %)
- 27 White (19 %)
- 5 Hispanic (3.5 %)
- 11 Multi Racial (7.8 %)
- 2 Asian (1.4 %)
- 2 American Indian/Alaskan Native (1.4 %)
- 7 “Other” (4.9 %)



Experiences of Discrimination in the Sample at Large

Most respondents (132 out of 142) felt that they had been discriminated against because of their housing status. This study showed that homeless individuals experienced the most discrimination from private businesses and law enforcement:

- 70.4 % from private businesses
- 66.6 % from law enforcement
- 49.7 % from medical services
- 43.7 % from social services

Comparison by Ethnic Demographics

Discrimination perceived by African-American and white respondents varied somewhat. The survey did not include enough respondents from other racial groups to draw conclusion about those subsets.

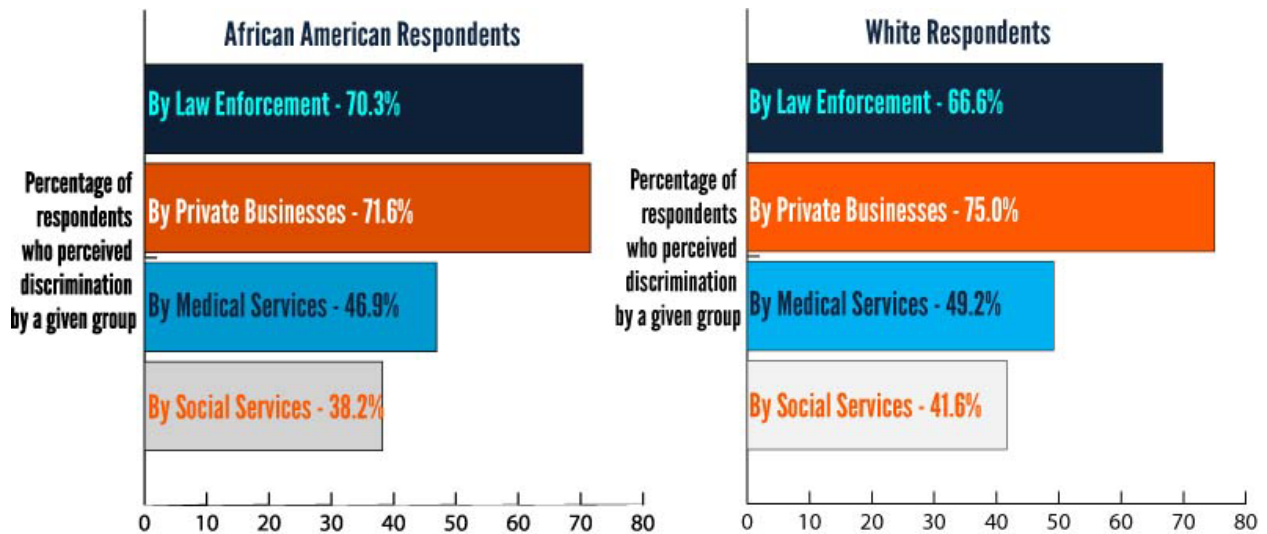
The following data compares against the sample as a whole. In the sample of 132 surveys, 87 were African-American and 27 were white.

“How often, in your experiences, did the following groups discriminate against people who are without housing?”

Percentage of respondents answering “yes”, compared across ethnic demographics:

	African - American	Whites	Whole Sample
Law Enforcement	70.3	66.6	66.6
Private Businesses	71.6	75.0	70.4
Medical Services	46.9	49.2	49.7
Social Services	38.2	41.6	43.7

N (samples) =132. N (African-American) =87 — N (whites) =27
 “Yes”= “Rarely” “Often” or “Very Often”



The results show that:

More whites (75%) than African Americans (71.6%) believed they had experienced discrimination from private businesses.

More African Americans (70.3%) than whites (66.6%) believed they had experienced discrimination from law enforcement.

Comparisons by Gender

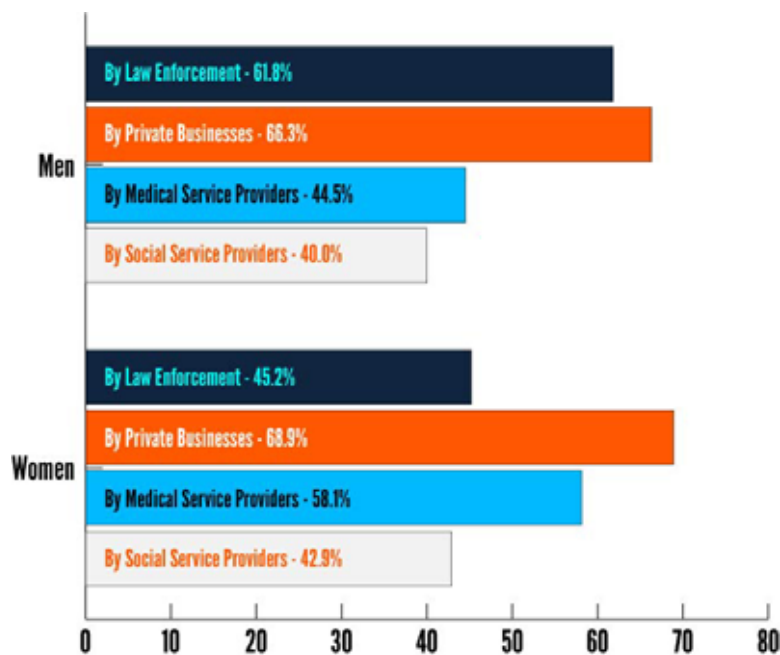
The study also made comparisons by gender. The results showed how women and men were treated based on their housing status. Out of 142 respondents there were 110 (77.5%) men and 32 (22.5%) women. Ages for women ranged from 32 to 68 years while age for men ranged from 20 to 77 years.

African American	19 Women	68 Men
White	8 Women	19 Men
Hispanic	0 Women	5 Men
Multi Racial	0 Women	11 Men
Asian	0 Women	2 Men
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	1 Woman	1 Man
Other Ethnicities	2 Women	5 Men

Percentage of respondents answering “yes”, compared across genders:

	Men	Women
Law Enforcement	61.8	45.2
Private Businesses	66.3	68.9
Medical Services	44.5	58.1
Social Services	40.0	42.9

N (Men) =110
 N (Women) =32.
 “Yes”= “Rarely” “Often” or
 “Very Often”



The results show that:

- Women perceived less discrimination from law enforcement (45.2%) and social services (42.9%)
- Men perceived less discrimination from medical services (44.5%) and social services (40.0%)
- Overall, the majority of men and women perceived discrimination the most from private businesses.

Recommendations

On an individual level, we recommend reaching out and being part of advocacy organizations that work directly with homeless individuals and can help bring about change. These organizations help by reducing discrimination by supporting policies and programs on the local, state, and federal levels. For instance, working with national and local partners can help reduce the number of laws that attempt to “criminalize” common activities by people experiencing homelessness.

On a national level, there are multiple jurisdictions (Rhode Island, Illinois, Connecticut and Puerto Rico) that have reacted to discrimination against people experiencing homelessness by passing a Homeless Bill of Rights. The purpose of a Homeless Bill of Rights is to ensure that no one is discriminated against on the basis of housing status.

We recommend that Washington, DC consider passage of a similar Homeless Bill of Rights.



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