**EMPIRICAL REVIEW**

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# Race matters in addressing homelessness: A scoping review and call for critical research

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**Abstract**

Structural racism contributes to homelessness in the United States, as evidenced by the stark racial disparities in who experiences it. This paper reviews research at the intersections of race and homelessness to advance efforts to understand and address racial inequities. Part 1 offers a synthesis of homelessness research from the 1980s to 2015, where several scholars examined the role of race and racism despite mainstream efforts to present the issue as race-neutral. Part 2 presents the results of a systematic scoping review of research at the intersections of race and homelessness from 2016 to 2021. The 90 articles included demonstrate a growing, multidisciplinary body of literature that documents how needs and trajectories of people experiencing homelessness differ by race, examines how the racialized structuring of society contributes to homelessness risk, and explores how programs, policies, and grassroots action can address inequities. In addition to charting findings and implications, included studies are appraised against research principles developed by Critical Race Theory scholars, mapping the potential of existing research on race and homelessness to challenge racism.

**KEYWORDS**
homelessness, housing, race, racial equity, racism

**Highlights**
- Research has begun to pay more attention to the role of racism in driving homelessness.
- I conducted a scoping review to map the methods and findings of recent US-based research.
- Recent studies include more qualitative methods; participants describe how race impacts experiences.
- Research is beginning to examine how homeless services and policies can reduce disparities.
- Applying critical theoretical frameworks may improve future research.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, Black people comprised 12% of the total US population and 21% of those in poverty, but they accounted for more than 40% of people experiencing homelessness (as measured by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's [HUD] counts of people living unsheltered and in shelter programs). Though smaller in number, Native Americans were overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness at similar proportions, accounting for 0.8% of the general population, 1.5% of those in poverty, and 3.3% of those experiencing homelessness (HUD, 2021; US Census Bureau, 2020). Based on HUD's official estimates, rates of Latinx homelessness are also disparate, but to a lesser extent. Latinx people were 23% of the homeless count, 26% of those in poverty, and 18% of the total population. Conversely, White people make up a smaller share of HUD's count of people experiencing homelessness (48%) than of the total population (74%) and those in poverty (58%), as do people categorized, broadly, as Asian (1.3% of those experiencing homelessness, 4.7% of people in poverty, 5.7% of the total population). Although less visible forms of homelessness are difficult

to enumerate, national estimates suggest that Black, Native, multiracial, and Hispanic individuals have higher rates of doubled-up homelessness compared to average rates (Richard et al., 2022).

Despite well-documented racial inequities, research on homelessness has not always examined the role of race. A 2016 systematic review of literature published between 1985 and 2015 asked, "Does race matter in addressing homelessness?" and, based on the small pool of studies examining race and homelessness, firmly concluded yes: pathways into homelessness, factors associated with homelessness risk, and outcomes of programs to address homelessness often differed by race (Jones, 2016). Around the same time, the United States "homelessness field" (service providers and government entities tasked with addressing homelessness) began to pay greater attention to the role of racism in driving the problem, including local efforts (e.g., Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, 2018) and multi-community initiatives (Olivet et al., 2018). Field-specific activities took place in the context of shifting attention to racial justice nationally, from the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, mainstream attention to the ways historical racism connects to current-day racial injustice (e.g., Ava Duverney's 13th Film), and the election of a President with white nationalist sympathies. In 2018, HUD heeded the call of advocates to prioritize racial equity in its response to homelessness by giving greater opportunity for homelessness assistance funding to communities actively working to address racial disparities (HUD, 2018, FR-6200-N-25).

Across homeless services and policy, attention to racism has increased. Has research on homelessness developed in step? The purpose of this paper is to review social science research at the intersections of race and homelessness to inform strategies to reduce racial inequities and, ultimately, address homelessness broadly. First, I describe my theoretical frameworks for understanding race and racism. Then, I present Part 1 of the empirical review, summarizing research on race and homelessness before 2016; I begin with a discussion of how and why race was not centered in early research and follow with a review of the seminal literature that focused on race, despite trends towards color-blind research. For this section, I drew on the Jones (2016) systematic review and other empirical studies and literature reviews that did not make it into Jones (2016). I then present Part 2, a systematic scoping review of literature from 2016 to 2021, updating Jones' (2016) review by examining recent years and broadening the scope of inclusion. In addition to describing results and implications of included studies, I also appraise them against methodological principles from Critical Race Theory (CRT) to evaluate the potential of research to assist in addressing racism and reducing its consequences. In the discussion, I summarize strengths of the literature and identify directions for future research.

## Theoretical framework: Race and racism

Although historically seen as a biological category, race is now understood as a social and political construct created to justify oppression (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Omi & Winant, 2015). By grouping people based on broad physical traits and geographies and relying on scientific and religious ideologies to designate certain groups as inferior, people of European descent (later racialized as White) justified settler colonialism, genocide, and enslavement (Wynter, 2003). Black Africans were stolen, traded, and forced into chattel slavery, and Indigenous people were also enslaved, displaced, and murdered. whiteness, in turn, was associated with superiority—and the right to own land and property. Although racial hierarchy based on white supremacy (dominance in that hierarchy) has been a consistent feature in US society, racial categorizations have changed over time in response to demographic, political, and cultural shifts—further demonstrating its social construction (Omi & Winant, 2015).

Ethnicity is another concept that has evolved under changing conditions and sometimes, but not always, overlaps with race (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007). Ethnic groups can be understood as collectives with shared ancestry and culture. Both ethnicity and race are concepts for categorizing people and attaching social meaning, but the key distinction made by social scientists is that ethnicity tends to be a process of self-identification, while race is externally imposed and reflective of societal power relations (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007). As Bonilla-Silva writes, "ethnic groups have exhibited tremendous malleability in terms of who belongs; racial ascriptions (initially) are imposed externally to justify the collective exploitation of a people and are maintained to preserve status differences" (1997, p. 469). The goal of this paper is to examine how race is associated with a particular status difference: experiencing homelessness.

In the US context, Hispanic/Latinx is a category that straddles race and ethnicity (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007). In many ways, Latinx has been racially constructed to position panethnic peoples of Latin American descent as inferior to people of various ethnicities racialized as White. Despite the US Census treating Hispanic/Latinx as an ethnic category separate from race, research demonstrates a mismatch between this conceptualization and how people see themselves and are viewed by others (Gómez, 2022). In the 2020 Census, nearly 40% of people identifying as Hispanic indicated "some other race" as their race, and analysis of 2010 data shows that most "some other race" write-ins were Latinx ancestries (Noe-Bustamente et al., 2021). A national survey of Latinx adults found that 50% chose "other" race and 42% chose White, but only 2% of those who identified as White believe non-Latinos see them as White (Vargas et al., 2016). Finally, many people from Latin America and the

Caribbean are also Black and/or Indigenous, with histories of violent displacement and enslavement similar to those descending from people enslaved in and indigenous to what is now the United States. Reflecting on this complexity, this paper—although on race and racism with limited attention to ethnicity—includes research on Latinx homelessness within its scope.

With an understanding of race as constructed to maintain white supremacy, we can understand racism as processes that perpetuate this hierarchy. In other words, racism is a system of advantages and disadvantages based on race (Tatum, 1997). It includes individual-level beliefs and practices, cultural messages, public policies, and other interconnecting micro- and macrolevel dynamics that benefit White people and harms people of color (Powell, 2008). Despite steadfast resistance to racist ideas and the systems of inequality they sustain, racism persists today. Society's resources are allocated along racial lines, leading to an array of health, social, and economic disparities summarized by Gilmore (2007) as "premature death" (p. 28). When we consider racial disparities in homelessness alongside the fact that homelessness can take as much as 25 years off an individual's life (Funk et al., 2022), we see the reality of that definition.

I draw on CRT to help review social science research on race and homelessness. CRT originates from legal scholarship that sought to explore how and why racism persists in US society when most policies and socially accepted norms condemn it. CRT, by name, arose in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement when scholars questioned why Black people did not experience sweeping improvements in their life opportunities and outcomes (Harris, 2015). It was developed as a framework to "help in theorizing, examining, and challenging the manner in which race and racism explicitly and implicitly impact social structures" (Aviles de Bradley, 2015, p. 844). CRT has several tenets, a few of which will be discussed further as they apply to research design, but two overarching principles are that white privilege and power continue to be maintained through structural forces, and disadvantages experienced by people of color are symptoms of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

## Positionality

CRT contends that people of color are best positioned (as compared to White people) to understand racism, and it is widely accepted in the homelessness field that people with *lived* experience, rather than experience from research, service provision, or policymaking, have the best understanding of how to address homelessness. Critical social scientists point to a lack of "embodied subjectivity" on the part of qualitative researchers (Haraway, 1988), a critique that can apply to literature reviews. Fine (1994) proposes that researchers respond to this critique by being "explicit about the space in which

(they) stand politically and theoretically even as (their) stances are multiple, shifting, and mobile" (p. 24). I am a White queer graduate student who has never experienced homelessness or housing insecurity. I studied psychology in college, worked in human service settings, and have participated in homelessness research and policy since 2013, including projects focused on racial equity. I am limited in my personal experience, but I am informed by my colleagues of color and colleagues with lived experience of homelessness, as well as people I have interviewed. Their ideas have helped me to see racism as a root cause of homelessness. My conceptualization of race and racism is also informed by scholars across multiple disciplines, including psychology (Fanon, 2008; Tatum, 1997), sociology (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Omi & Winant, 2015), geography (Gilmore, 2007), and anticolonial theory (Wynter, 2003), who emphasize that racial disparities today must be explicitly contextualized in their social, political, and historical construction.

In conducting a scoping review, my position influences the way I read, how I extract findings from studies, and how I discuss them. For example, the interpretative work I did to propose future research directions is biased by my race and class, but also by my position as a consultant to stakeholders in the homelessness response system. Although I endeavor to critique this system, I may have blind spots when it comes to inquiry and ideas that go beyond the state (e.g., direct action, mutual aid). My position as a graduate student influenced my decision to include only peer-reviewed literature, excluding unpublished papers or nonwritten forms of knowledge sharing. As a result, a disproportionate share of the research reviewed is conducted by White authors—due to exclusion across academic and grantmaking institutions (Roberts et al., 2020; Taffe & Gilpin, 2021). Therefore, the literature itself should be seen as coming from a racialized standpoint. Hopefully, this paper can help make explicit those standpoints.

## PART 1: RESEARCH ON RACE AND HOMELESSNESS BEFORE 2016

Social scientists in the United States have examined homelessness since studies on post-Civil War poverty, unemployment, and displacement in the 1890s, housing loss and transiency in the Great Depression of the 1930s, and in-depth inquiries of Skid Row residents begging in the 1940s (Lee et al., 2010). Early research on homelessness was biased toward understanding its causes at the person level, with a focus on the social and cultural reasons why single White men would be living without a traditional family, moving from place to place, and staying in inadequate housing. Research often ignored structural dynamics and used language that stigmatized the people about whom they wrote. Beginning in the 1980s, researchers began to refer to a "new homeless,"

observing increased rates and demographic shifts in those who were unsheltered and using shelters, with more women, children, and people of color. Many researchers continued to attribute homelessness to individual characteristics, but now focused more on serious mental illness and substance use than moral or cultural failings, and with new interest in families (e.g., Bassuk et al., 1984). Some criticized the medicalized model of homelessness and emphasized lack of affordable housing and good-paying jobs as primary causes (e.g., Snow et al., 1986).

During this time, activists working nationally and locally pressured US Congress to enact federal funding to address homelessness (Baumohl, 1996). Between 1987 and 1994, federal funding for emergency homeless services grew from US\$180 million to US\$1.8 billion. Research on homelessness grew along with this increase in resources. New studies documented that people of color were dramatically overrepresented among those identified as homeless. From studies in individual states and cities (First et al., 1988; Rossi, 1988; Roth, 1985) to the first reports from national service demonstration projects (reports by Wright, as cited in Baker, 1996), it was clear that Black individuals and families were at greater risk of homelessness. In several studies, Native Americans were also overrepresented (Shlay & Rossi, 1992).

Despite the data, the racial dynamics of homelessness were not the focus of researchers during this time—at least in their published works. Reflecting on the ideological and political barriers preventing the United States from effectively addressing homelessness, Blasi (1994) wrote, "There is probably no fact about homeless people so well established as the fact that people of color, particularly African-Americans, are greatly overrepresented in the homeless population … What is most remarkable about these data is how little attention they have received either in the mass media or in the academic literature on homelessness" (p. 6). Some scholars noted racial disparities but diagnosed them as just a consequence of disparities in poverty (Blau, 1992; Rossi, 1989). Others were wary of being associated with right-wing authors who used racial disparities to further "other" people experiencing homelessness and discourage public support. As a result, more progressive scholars decided to portray a "just like us," colorblind image of homelessness that encouraged White people to see themselves as "just a paycheck away" from homelessness, and thus more supportive of homelessness response (Blasi, 1994).

Not everyone agreed with this approach, both at the time and retrospectively. Burt (1992) criticized this strategy among academics and advocates, arguing that many White Americans would be less likely to help on the premise of "it could be anyone," when their personal experiences (of minimal risk) painted a different picture. White (1991) argued that certain images of White, hardworking families who fall on hard times and become homeless helped reinforce the idea that only a certain "worthy poor" deserved help for their housing loss. When these images become "one's mental image of those homeless families whom the citizenry should feel moved to help, one is likely to resist poverty policies that shift goods and power to groups that depart from the image in obvious ways" (White, 1991, p. 306). Thus, framing the problem as individual discouraged changes to systems of housing, wages, criminal justice, and welfare that were the root drivers of homelessness—systems that were also racialized, and particularly anti-Black (Edwards, 2021). Despite this dynamic in early research, a subset of literature examined race and homelessness closely. These works, summarized in the next section, describe how race was related to homelessness risk and people's needs and characteristics, offered explanations for disparities, and discussed implications for the nation's approach to homelessness response.

## Race and homelessness risk

Early research on race and homelessness documented high rates of Black homelessness across traditional and nontraditional sources of homelessness data. Hopper and Milburn (1996) found that proportions of Black Americans among samples of those experiencing homelessness after World War II ranged from 9% to 40%, noting that it was not until the 1980s that this overrepresentation surpassed the proportion of Black people in poverty. However, they reject the widespread impression that the 1980s represented the beginning of homelessness among Black Americans. They describe how enslaved Black persons who escaped chattel slavery and were labeled "runaways" would have met current definitions of homelessness, and those who remained enslaved were often inadequately sheltered. Emancipation did not bring homes, and Johnson (2010) explains how most Black people during the Civil War would have been considered homeless by today's definitions. Research on the living conditions of emancipated people during this time confirms most were homeless or in inadequate shelter, living in large encampments alongside Union Army camps, overcrowded temporary hospitals, or precarious situations of mutual aid when shelter from the government was unavailable, abruptly withdrawn, or unsafe (Downs, 2012). Many (by some estimates at least 1 million) former slaves died from 1862 to 1870 (Downs, 2012). For those who survived, poor conditions lasted through Reconstruction; although the Freedmen's Bureau helped Black families acquire land, gains made were rolled back by harsh suppression and exacerbated homelessness. For example, vagrancy laws widespread in Southern states criminalized unemployed (not working as a contract laborer for a White employer) Black people who were then forced into prison labor and deprived of adequate housing (Hopper & Milburn, 1996).

Considering homelessness among Black people at the turn of the century and further North, Johnson describes an account by W. E. B. Du Bois that 14% of "inmates" at a Philadelphia almshouse were Black, twice that of the population overall. Johnson suggests that Du Bois also documented the first data on Black families experiencing homelessness, writing that in Philadelphia's seventh ward in the mid-1890s, "As many as 30% of the Negro families [lacked] some of the very elementary accommodations necessary to health and decency" (p. 293, as cited in Johnson, 2010, p. 591).

Early research paid limited attention to Indigenous homelessness. Many survivors of settler colonial violence, from initial contact to state-sanctioned dispossession through the Indian Removal Act (1830) and Dawes Act (1887), would meet today's homelessness definitions. However—perhaps due to racist beliefs about Indigenous people as unfit to own property by Eurocentric ideals and laws—early surveys of people experiencing homelessness did not consistently include a category for Native groups (Whitbeck et al., 2012), but those that did found overrepresentation. For example, in 1950s Chicago, people categorized as Native American were nearly 2% of single adults living unsheltered, three times their share of the city population at the time (Bogue, 1963). Burt et al. (1999) estimated that 8% of people using homelessness assistance programs were Native American, compared to 1% of the total population nationally. Later research found that across six reservations in Minnesota, 9% of residents were unhoused and 14% were experiencing doubled-up homelessness—staying with family or friends, often in crowded conditions, because housing of their own was out of reach (Owen et al., 2007).

Baker (1994, 1996) was one of the first scholars to publish on Latinx homelessness in the US Reviewing data from 18 cities, she reported that, on average, Latinx homelessness was 3.5 percentage points lower than their share of the general population, despite high rates of Latinx poverty. In "Homelessness and the Latino Paradox," Baker (1996) suggests this finding may reveal limitations in how homelessness is defined and measured. Rather than use shelters or stay in visible unsheltered locations (e.g., parks, streets), Latinx people may be more likely to double up or sleep out of sight due to concerns about language inclusion in shelters, stigma related to using services, or fear of immigration enforcement. This theory is supported by other studies of the time (Jones, 2016). Using publicly available American Housing Survey and Census data from the early 1990s, Wasson (1995) found that Black and Hispanic households experienced similarly high housing cost burdens, but that poor Hispanic/Latinx households had more people per room and were more likely to have subfamilies living together. Conroy and Heer (2003) later found that homelessness among Mexican-born persons in Los Angeles was nearly seven times greater than their share of the population. As Baker suggested, Mexican-born persons were more likely to avoid shelter or visible unsheltered locations (Conroy & Heer, 2003).

Although research from the 20th century documented disproportionate homelessness among people of color, particularly Black people, based on various sample designs, the availability of more standard national data began in 2007 when HUD mandated that all communities receiving federal funding for homeless assistance collect and report data on people using services. Communities were also required to conduct a point-in-time (PIT) count of people experiencing sheltered and unsheltered homelessness at least every other year, and many now do so annually. These policies have produced period prevalence and PIT counts of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness. Since that time, national reporting has shown overrepresentation among Black and Native Americans across the United States (HUD, 2022).

## Race and people's characteristics

Research beginning in the 1980s compared the characteristics of people experiencing homelessness across racial groups. Compared to White people, people of color (who in these studies were predominantly Black) were younger, more likely to have graduated high school, experienced less mental illness, were less likely to report family problems in childhood, had more social contacts, and were more likely to attribute their homelessness to economic issues, like inability to find a good paying job (Andrade, 1988; First et al., 1988; Jones, 2016; Koegel et al., 1995; Leda & Rosenheck, 1995; North & Smith, 1994). Studies also showed that Black and Latinx adults were more likely to experience episodic homelessness, with a longer gap between losing income and becoming homeless, but once homeless, experiencing more brief and numerous episodes than White adults (First et al., 1988; North & Smith, 1994; Rossi, 1988). Black men were less likely than White men to be transient, more often homeless near their place of origin (Carter, 2011; First et al., 1988). Research on youth began later, but reflects some patterns found among single adults. Hickler and Auerswald (2009) found that Black youth described more contact with their families and were more likely than White youth to cite economic reasons for housing instability. Black youth were more likely to have stayed with family in the past month, but more likely to have been in foster care. Some authors from this period reflected on these differences by race and suggested they revealed racialized causes of homelessness. In general, they theorized that participants of color may face more structural barriers to stable housing, while White people (who face less discrimination across housing and labor markets) may cite more individual and family-level causes (North & Smith, 1994). The next section

summarizes research explicitly focused on how race intersects with pathways into homelessness.

## Race and causes of homelessness

Johnson (2010), writing about the 1980s/1990s, suggested that even when high rates of homelessness among Black people were acknowledged, the nature and causes of racial disparities in homelessness were "misinterpreted." She describes this pattern in the literature as "when Blacks themselves [were] blamed for homelessness rather than attributing homelessness to public policies and structural changes such as urban renewal and deindustrialization" (p. 601). As early as the 1990s, however, several researchers described the structural forces placing people of color at greater risk. Hopper and Milburn (1996) argued that episodes of homelessness among Black individuals and families relieved the strain on extended households stressed financially by deindustrialization (which hit northern Black factory workers early and hard), employment discrimination across a growing service sector economy, reduced federal subsidies for low-income housing, destruction of single-room occupancy units, and policies that encouraged residential segregation. Baker (1996) suggests that Black households were pushed into, and then more reliant on, public housing (in 1987, a third of Black renters relied on public housing, compared to 16% of Latinx renters), and therefore destruction of public housing more greatly affected Black Americans. Reflecting on the tendency of Latinx households to double up in the face of housing deprivation, Baker (1996) writes, "The depletion of African American network resources by persistent unemployment, welfare cutbacks, and the loss of affordable housing may have undone a response to residential instability that was historically similar to what we see today among Latinos" (p. 139). In other words, macrolevel forces prevented Black families from consistently providing shelter for family and friends. Limited research focused on the proximate causes of Indigenous homelessness described high rates of unemployment and poverty, poor educational opportunities, scarcity of affordable housing, and federal disinvestment from reservations housing (Owen et al., 2007; Whitbeck et al., 2012)

Some research focused on racism and social exclusion. Shinn (2010) argued that racial disparities in homelessness are not just a result of economic and housing trends that happened to hit Black and Indigenous people hardest but are a result of societal choices—particularly, choices to exclude people of color across income earning, wealth accumulation, and housing, and to overcriminalize and incarcerate. Shinn highlights how race is more strongly associated with wealth than income, and that wealth accumulation is tied to historical and contemporary discrimination across employment, housing, credit, and lending (Conley, 1999), and that generational poverty is associated with homelessness risk (Shinn et al., 1998). People with felonies can be denied welfare, subsidized housing, and other benefits. When a household member is incarcerated, families lose income and support (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). This focus on the legal system builds on earlier studies documenting greater rates of arrest and incarceration among people of color experiencing homelessness (Jones, 2016).

These scholars described structural racism across multiple systems, including housing, as a way to understand racial disparities in homelessness for people of color. Carter (2011) offered the only study to examine this empirically. Using variables related to homelessness risk and housing insecurity in the 1997 American Housing Survey, Carter found high rates of residential segregation and lower affordable supply were significantly associated with inadequate housing quality and overcrowding in Black households.

## Race and homelessness response

In the 2000s, research focused on evaluation of policy and program effectiveness. I found only one study from this period that examined how race influenced the efficacy of homelessness interventions. In a study of veterans, Black clients with caseworkers and housing vouchers exited homelessness into higher quality neighborhoods than those with vouchers alone (Jones, 2016; Patterson et al., 2014). This difference was not significant for White veterans, suggesting the importance of housing navigation and support to combat residential discrimination. Several studies offered policy implications even if they did not analyze policies themselves. Baker (1996) called for "housing subsidies, tax and wage policies that bolster working-class earnings, [and] aggressive antidiscrimination policies that open up new sectors of the labor and housing markets still closed on the basis of race" (p. 140). Carter (2011) argued that the fact that segregation was related to inadequate housing among Black people highlighted the need for better enforcement of Fair Housing. Shinn (2010) suggested that more generous social welfare policies could mitigate the economic impacts of racism and social exclusion. The next section delves into more recent research, which includes many more studies on the effectiveness of contemporary strategies to address homelessness and its racial inequities.

## PART 2: SCOPING REVIEW ON RACE AND HOMELESSNESS 2016–2021

The second part of this paper explores how social science research has grown since the homelessness field has begun to more ardently discuss and examine racial inequities. I update and expand the review conducted by Jones, 2016 through a systematic scoping review of literature published between June 2015 (the end of Jones' search) and July 2021.

## Method

### Study selection

A scoping review aims to map literature in a field, describing the volume, characteristics, and major findings of a research area (Arksey & O'Malley, 2018; Levac et al., 2010). A scoping review is like a systematic review in terms of transparency and structure but addresses broader topics and includes many different study designs. I searched ProQuest Social Science Premium Collection, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed journal articles. My search strategy indexed peer-reviewed academic literature in which the title or abstract included "homeless" or "homelessness" and one or more terms indicating that race was studied (e.g., race, Black) (see Supporting Information: Material A). Using this strategy, 559 records remained after removing duplicates (Figure 1). I reviewed each abstract, excluding those that: did not study homelessness; did not study race; only included homelessness or race as control variables; provided no analysis at the intersection of race and homelessness (e.g., housing status and race were separate variables in a regression); were not in the United States; or were conference proceedings, book reviews, biographies, or opinions. At this stage, 238 studies were included at the
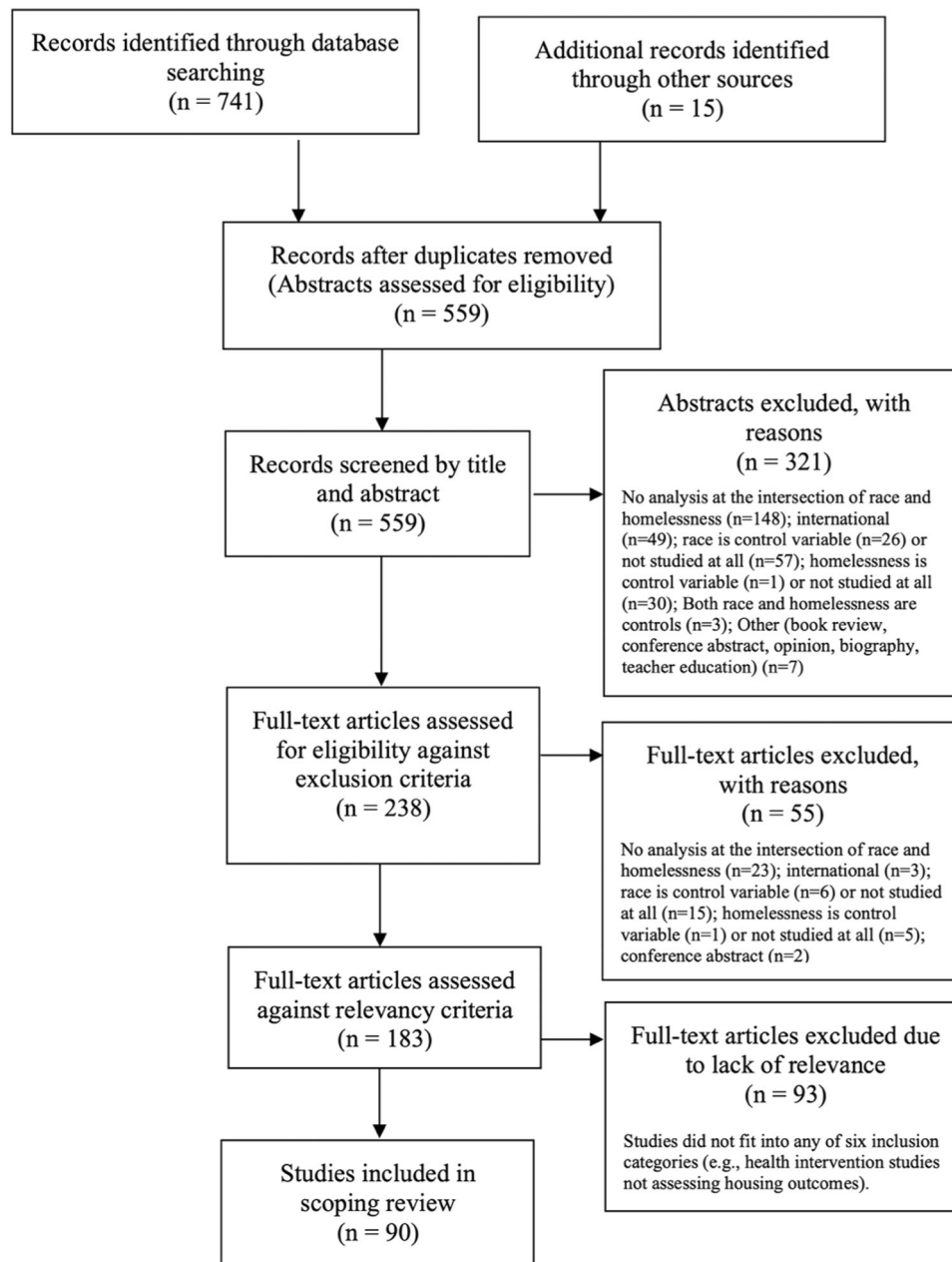


**FIGURE 1** Flow diagram for the selection of scoping review studies.

abstract level. Following full-text review, 55 more were excluded. Unless the study met the exclusion criteria listed, studies of all research designs were included.

Following Jones (2016), articles were included if they examined associations between race or racism and (1) characteristics of people experiencing homelessness, (2) causes of homelessness, or (3) services to help people exit homelessness. I *additionally* included articles that examined race or racism in relation to (4) policies to address or prevent homelessness, (5) activism to address or prevent homelessness, and (6) theoretical understandings of homelessness or how to address it. Through a CRT lens, the current study is grounded on an a priori recognition of the influence of racism on homelessness. I do not ask whether race and racism are related to homelessness but instead explore *how* research has examined these associations.

Studies that included race and homelessness as variables but were focused on an outcome not associated with housing stability (e.g., human immunodeficiency testing, diabetes care) were not included. To support reliability at this stage, a second reader independently reviewed a randomly selected 10% ($n = 19$) of articles. The second reader and I determined whether an article fits into one of the six inclusion categories and agreed on 89% of the decisions. Disagreements were discussed and led to clarification of inclusion criteria. I proceeded with reviewing the remaining articles. After this process, 93 studies were excluded, leaving $n = 90$ studies included.

## Charting the data

From each included study, the following items were collected and organized into a data charting table (Supporting Information: Material B): topic; sub-population (e.g., youth, families); location; definition of homelessness; methodology; relevant findings; and relevant practice, policy, or theory implications stated by the authors. Johnson (2010) observed that racial disparities in homelessness were often misattributed to cultural or individual deficits rather than structural disadvantage. In response to this critique, I examined each article's approach to framing and interpreting racial differences by applying research principles developed by CRT scholars (e.g., Garcia et al., 2018; Gillborn, et al., 2018; Sablan, 2019). Based on these principles, which can be applied to both quantitative and qualitative research, I looked for the following elements across studies:

(1) *Race as racism*: Gillborn et al. (2018) write, "Where 'race' is associated with an unequal outcome, it is likely to indicate the operation of racism, but mainstream interpretations may erroneously impute 'race' as a cause in its own right as if the minoritized group is inherently deficient somehow" (p. 171). Thus, I examined whether studies describe racial difference as symptoms of racism (disadvantage or advantage based on race), or if

authors' statements (or silences) allow for deficit-oriented interpretations. (2) *Heterogeneous and intersectional experiences*: Critical race quantitative (QuantCrit) scholars encourage more than two racial groupings in quantitative analyses (Gillborn et al., 2018). Do the analyses compare all non-White to White, or were additional comparisons made? Relatedly, CRT emphasizes intersectionality, calling for quantitative research to examine differences across gender and citizenship status within racial groups. (3) *Experiential knowledge*: CRT scholars aim to center the voices and experiences of marginalized groups, uplifting counternarratives that challenge society's dominant narratives. Applying this principle, I looked for positionality statements with attention to race and homelessness and whether the article references knowledge shared by people with lived experience of homelessness.

## Characteristics of included studies

Studies most frequently examined characteristics of people experiencing homelessness ($n = 40$; 44%) and services to address it ($n = 39$; 43%). Fewer focused on causes, policy, activism, or theory. The most frequent disciplines were social work ($n = 25$; 28%), public health ($n = 22$; 24%), and psychology ($n = 13$; 14%) ($n = 7$ specifically community psychology), with social policy, sociology, education, geography, nursing, urban studies, and urban planning also represented. Most used quantitative methods ($n = 64$; 71%). For studies of a particular household type, youth were the most common ($n = 31$; 34% of all articles), followed by single adults ($n = 23$; 26%). The majority were set in urban areas ($n = 56$; 62%), with Los Angeles the most frequent site, followed by San Francisco/Oakland. None focused solely on rural homelessness, but several statewide studies included rural areas. See Supporting Information: Material B for all of the data charted for included studies and Supporting Information: Material C for a summary table of key characteristics.

## Critical race appraisal

I appraised included studies on CRT methodological principles. Notes for each principle for each study are available in Supporting Information: Material B. Thirty-seven studies acknowledged "Race as racism." These stated that observed racial differences should be understood as in the context of historical and ongoing racism and discrimination. For example, five qualitative studies used CRT as a theoretical framework (Aviles de Bradley, 2015; Ellis & Geller, 2016; Elwood & Lawson, 2020; Moxley & Washington, 2016a, 2016b; Olivet et al., 2021), and three explicitly named white supremacy as a social force (Bruey, 2019; Elwood &

Lawson, 2020; Hufnagel, 2021). For studies not meeting this criterion, justification for racial differences was either not provided or more ambiguous terms were used, such as "racially patterned health and social disparities" (Fusaro et al., 2018), or "higher levels of existing vulnerability" (Schinka et al., 2017). These terms might permit deficit-oriented interpretations of racial differences, even when authors do not explicitly make those claims.

I categorized 26 studies as attending to intersectionality in some way. Several used intersectionality as a theoretical framework (e.g., Bullock et al., 2020; Elwood & Lawson, 2020; Otiniano Verissimo et al., 2021). Others reported analyses at intersections of race, gender, age, or other characteristics—including both quantitative (Carter et al., 2019; Cronley, 2020; Flentje et al., 2017; Gattis & Larson, 2016; Montgomery et al., 2020; Morton et al., 2019) and qualitative analyses (Bullock et al., 2020; Moxley & Washington, 2016a, 2016b; Roschelle, 2017).

I determined that 18 studies met the criteria for "experiential knowledge." Several have positionality statements where an author's experience of homelessness or housing insecurity is disclosed (Dressel et al., 2020; Edwards, 2020; Olivet et al., 2021) or report research team members with lived experience (Herring et al., 2019; Ivanich & Warner, 2019). Two used participatory research designs (Dozier, 2019; Moxley & Washington, 2016a, 2016b), one worked with an advisory board comprised of people with lived experience (Paul et al., 2020), and another highlighted unhoused activists (Hufnagel, 2021). Others were qualitative studies where authors emphasize how the stories shared by participants challenged dominant narratives (Aparicio et al., 2019; Aviles de Bradley, 2015; Bullock et al., 2020; Ellis & Geller, 2016). It was not always easy to decide which studies fit this criteria, but I was guided by CRT principles and other critical qualitative scholars who critique qualitative research built solely on "voices" of marginalized people without critical analysis of both participant and researcher perspectives (Fine, 1994; Tuck & Yang, 2014). When authors were not clear about the way power impacts participants' narratives or their own choice of quotes and themes, I decided not to categorize them as meeting the criteria for experiential knowledge (Robinson, 2018; Roschelle, 2017; Wille et al., 2017), but others may disagree with my subjective assessment. Several studies disclosed the lack of experiential knowledge through positionality statements (Elwood & Lawson, 2020; Pavlakis, 2021; Reppond & Bullock, 2020), providing context on differences between researchers and participants and allowing readers to make informed judgments of methods and interpretations. These particular studies met my criteria for experiential knowledge because the authors were explicit about how positionality influenced their work and used critical perspectives to identify counternarratives.

Additional studies beyond those identifies may have included authors with lived experience of homelessness. By presenting the information provided, I am not arguing that all researchers with marginalize identities should disclose their personal experiences. However, as research on social issues increasingly strives for inclusion of those most impacted, it is worth mapping the information studies report. Some scholars suggest that reflexivity is even more important for people with dominant identities, helping to gradually make it more normative and safe for those with marginalized identities to disclose without repercussion (Massoud, 2022).

## Findings

The various findings from the 90 included studies are summarized below, organized by the six categories for which they were found to be relevant to the review: characteristics of people experiencing homelessness; causes of homelessness; services to help people exit homelessness; policies to prevent or end homelessness; community response and activism to prevent or end homelessness; and theoretical literature relevant to understanding or addressing homelessness.

## Characteristics of people experiencing homelessness

Recent research explored race and risk of homelessness, trajectories of homelessness, health needs, child welfare involvement, discrimination, employment, and social support. First, 22 studies provide continued evidence that race is significantly associated with homelessness in the United States using sources beyond HUD's official counts. In a nationally representative survey, Fusaro et al. (2018) found that lifetime prevalence of homelessness was 17% for non-Latinx Black adults, 8% for Latinx (of any race), and 5% for non-Latinx White. The study asked if respondents had ever been homeless or lived in a shelter; in contrast, another national survey (Otiniano Verissimo et al., 2021) asked about lifetime experience of homelessness episodes lasting at least one month. As in Fusaro et al. (2018), Black respondents had the highest rate of homelessness (nearly 8%), followed by Native (7%), Latinx (6%), White (5%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (3%). Comparison of these two studies suggests that Black people are much more likely to have ever experienced an episode of homelessness, but measures of homelessness lasting at least a month show less disparate rates.

Studies also specifically examined associations between race and homelessness among families, formerly incarcerated men, veterans, and youth. Compared to mothers in New York City public housing, those residing in city shelters were more likely to be Black and less

likely to be Latinx (Reilly et al., 2019). Among formerly incarcerated men in Pennsylvania, Black men were more likely to experience homelessness (Remster, 2021). Studies on veterans used data on homeless service users and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Homelessness Screener used across VHA settings. Consistent with other studies, research found higher rates of homelessness among Black veterans compared to White veterans (Breland et al., 2015; Montgomery et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2017, 2021). For example, in a nationally representative survey of US veterans, 8% of White and 19% of Black veterans had ever been homeless as an adult (Tsai et al., 2021). Montgomery et al. (2020) examined gender and race among veterans and found that Native, Black, and Latino men had the greatest odds of homelessness, while White women and Asian/Pacific Islander women had decreased odds compared to White men. In the only study of rural areas, veterans experiencing homelessness in micropolitan areas in Nebraska were more likely to be White (84%) than veterans in metropolitan areas (54%) (Tsai et al., 2015).

Youth were the focus of eight studies. Being Black was associated with homelessness in multiple studies: records of youth aging out of foster care linked to homeless service use in Washington (Shah et al., 2017); Michigan's Department of Education data (Cowen, 2017; Evangelist & Shaefer, 2020); a retrospective study of self-reported childhood homelessness among women in Wisconsin (Mersky & Janczewski, 2018); and the Voices of Youth Count, the first nationally representative survey of unaccompanied youth (Morton et al., 2018). In the Voices of Youth Count, Black youth had an 83% higher risk of homelessness compared to all other youth. In contrast, one study of youth in foster care in Missouri found that non-White youth (majority Black) were more likely to have avoided homelessness, defined narrowly as spending a night on the street (88% vs. 78%) (Shpiegel, 2016), and in Los Angeles, Black youth using drop-in services were less likely than White youth to self-identify as "homeless" (Winetrobe et al., 2017).

How homelessness is measured influences findings. Studies using broader definitions of homelessness provide insight into homelessness among Latinx youth. Michigan school data revealed heightened risk for Latinx children (Cowen, 2017; Evangelist & Shaefer, 2020). A study at a Southeastern university found higher rates of homelessness (including doubling up and couch surfing) among Latinx students—nearly 16% of Latinx students experienced homelessness, compared to 9% of non-Latinx students (Haskett et al., 2020). The Voices of Youth Count found greater relative risk for Latinx youth, but this was not significant after controlling for education level and being a parent (Morton et al., 2018), reflecting findings of another survey that found disparities among Latinx youth to be explained mostly by other factors (Watt & Kim, 2019). A nationally representative survey found lower risk of homelessness for Latinx youth

(Brakenhoff et al., 2015), but this study did not include doubling up or couch surfing. One study with a broad definition of homelessness still saw lower risk among Latinx adolescents (who had been in substance use treatment) (DiGuiseppi et al., 2020).

Small sample sizes limited evidence on other racial identities beyond White, Black, and Latinx. Studies found lower risk for Asian students (Evangelist & Shaefer, 2020) and Asian and Pacific Islander veterans (Montgomery et al., 2020), relative to White counterparts. In the Voices of Youth Count, being Asian was not a significant predictor of risk compared to all other racial groups (Morton et al., 2018). For Indigenous young adults, 12-month prevalence of homelessness was 12.2% (Morton et al., 2012, 2020), three times the rate of White non-Latinx young adults. Most Native youth experiencing homelessness were in urban areas (Morton et al., 2019).

### Homelessness trajectories

Studies examined the duration and frequency of homelessness episodes. Findings varied but suggest that people of color may face greater challenges to exiting homelessness. Analysis of VHA data showed that Black veterans have higher odds of being persistently homeless, persistently at risk, and newly homeless than White veterans (Byrne et al., 2015). White veterans were more likely to be unsheltered than non-White veterans (Byrne et al., 2016). In Oklahoma City, White, "other," and multiracial adults had fewer months of homelessness than Black and Native adults (Wrighting et al., 2019), and in Seattle people of color had almost one more year of homelessness than White participants (Bielenberg et al., 2020). Among a small sample of LGBTQ young adults experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles, those categorized as multiracial or "other" had were more than six times as likely to have been homeless in earlier childhood compared to White participants (Siconolfi et al., 2019). Finally, youth of color took longer to secure stable housing after a homelessness episode, compared to White youth (Braciszewski et al., 2016).

### Health needs

Earlier research established a general trend: Lower substance use disorders and serious mental illness among people of color experiencing homelessness compared to White people. Recent research supports the theory that health issues contribute less, overall, to homelessness rates among people of color. Among homeless and unstably housed young adults in Harris County, Texas, White youth had highest rates of lifetime substance use (Santa Maria et al., 2018). Flentje et al. (2017) found that among lesbian and bisexual women, women of color had a reduced odds of a substance use disorder. Among adults in permanent supportive housing (PSH), Black participants reported better mental wellbeing than other racial groups (Spector et al., 2020). Veterans of color

had reduced risk of early death (Schinka et al., 2017). In a national study of emergency department visits, the share of patients who were Black and Latinx was slightly higher among homeless than nonhomeless visits, but to an extent lower than other cross sections of people experiencing homelessness (Lombardi et al., 2020).

Two studies focused on the mental health needs of specific communities of color. Among Black youth in Milwaukee, perceived homelessness stigma and racial discrimination were associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms, and racial discrimination was the most consistent predictor of depression, compared to other forms of discrimination, homelessness severity, and personal characteristics (Gattis & Larson, 2016). In a study of Latino day laborers in King County, WA, those who were homeless or in temporary housing had higher levels of depression and anxiety than those stably housed (Hill et al., 2019). Studies like these emphasize the need for mental health services that are inclusive and equitable for people of color, regardless of whether health needs are the root cause of racial disparities in homelessness risk.

### Trauma and system involvement

Research on trauma also supports the perspective that mental health needs matter, even if health conditions do not explain racial inequities in homelessness. Research with trans women of color framed homelessness as a structural health disparity and showed that abuse due to gender expression contributed to homelessness risk (Reback et al., 2017). Farley, (2016) explored the needs of Native women engaging in sex work or who have been sex trafficked; 98% of the sample were currently or previously homeless, and trauma and violence were common. Related to directly measuring trauma is understanding experiences with systems responding to, and often perpetuating, adverse experiences. Linking homeless services and child protection services (CPS) administrative data sets in San Francisco, Putnam-Hornstein et al. (2017) found that nearly twice as many Black clients accessing homelessness services had a CPS history as did White clients (60% vs. 32%). No significant differences in CPS histories were observed for other racial groups.

### Experiences of discrimination

A few studies examine experiences of discrimination (Ivanich & Warner, 2019; Priester et al., 2017; Wrighting et al., 2019). "Being homeless" was reported as the main reason for the perceived discrimination experienced by White, Native, and multiracial adults, but Black participants endorsed race as the main reason (Wrighting et al., 2019). Youth of color were more likely than White youth to report arrest (21% vs. 16%) and being harassed by the police (34% vs. 24%) while homeless (Ivanich & Warner, 2019). Several qualitative studies described people's experiences of discrimination in more depth, but authors framed those experiences as contributors to homelessness risk, so are discussed in the section on causes of homelessness.

### Employment and social support

Only three studies focused on characteristics framed as strengths. Youth of color were more likely to be employed (Parast et al., 2019). Among youth using drop-in services in Los Angeles, Black youth each had higher home-based peer support, family emotional support, and family instrumental support than their White counterparts (Brown et al., 2020). Finally, in a qualitative study with older Black women in the Midwest, participants shared how African-American culture and family-derived "folk knowledge" helped in recovery from homelessness (Moxley & Washington, 2016a).

## Causes of homelessness

The studies above imply connections between characteristics and causes of homelessness but were not designed to examine causal pathways, and discussions of this nature were limited. Eleven studies explicitly examined how causes of homelessness are racialized. One was quantitative. In a national survey, racial discrimination was associated with increased odds of homelessness (Otiniano Verissimo et al., 2021). This study adds to research describing experiences of discrimination among people who are homelessness (Ivanich & Warner, 2019; Wrighting et al., 2019) with evidence that discrimination contributes to homelessness risk.

Ten studies on causes were qualitative, with people describing their pathways into homelessness through interviews and ethnography. One generalized across subgroups of people of color. Olivet et al. (2021) interviewed 195 people experiencing homelessness across eight (mostly urban) communities across the United States. All participants identified as people of color, and two-thirds were Black. Barriers to quality affordable housing, challenges in economic mobility (e.g., employment discrimination, lack of jobs paying a living wage, limited resources across social networks), criminal legal system involvement, structural barriers to social support (including child welfare system involvement), and limited support for behavior health challenges characterized participants' narratives. In Oakland, older Black adults described how everyday discrimination and structurally racist policies and institutions helped drive them into homelessness (Paul et al., 2020). They also described residential segregation, limited family wealth, and, finally, the early deaths of family and friends causing strains to social support.

### Women

Several studies limited their scope to women of color, exemplifying an intersectional approach to exploring the

causes of homelessness. Bullock et al. (2020) and Roschelle (2017) showed how women who experienced partner abuse contextualized immediate adverse life events within institutional practices and policies that oppress women, people of color, and women of color especially. Bullock et al. (2020) describe how the impacts of intimate partner violence are intensified for women of color due to less access cash savings and disproportionate criminalization and eviction. Roschelle (2017) shares how Black and Latinx women experiencing homelessness understand men who have perpetrated violence as enacting harm, in part, because of their own class and race-based oppression. In two additional studies in the Midwest (Moxley & Washington, 2016a, 2016b), women pointed to cutbacks to social services, loss of a spouse, and damaged credit as additional causes of homelessness. The authors note that substance use and serious mental illness were not common across participants' narratives.

### Youth

Recent research on youth homelessness challenges limited narratives of family deficits. Robinson (2018) complicates the family rejection pathway into homelessness for LGBTQ youth in Austin, TX, describing how poverty, residential mobility, and systems involvement create strained family ties, and how those conditions interact with heteronormativity to precipitate homelessness. The findings challenge the idea that poor families, and in particular poor families of color, are more homophobic or transphobic than White, middle-class families. Rather, structural inequities create conditions where family conflict (which happens across race and class) leads to homelessness. In reviewing the forces that contribute to rising youth homelessness in Washington, DC, Mai Abdul Rahman (2015) describes how the Black middle class experienced repressive political backlash following the Civil Rights Movement, and how the War on Drugs and mass incarceration created new trends in poverty and unemployment. Rahman then points to more recent dynamics of gentrification and displacement, showing how a disproportionate share of Black students experiencing homelessness are from gentrifying Wards.

### Latinx

Further demonstrating how local, national, and global dynamics influence homelessness, Chinchilla and Gabrielian (2019) explore factors that exacerbate risk for Latinx communities. Informants working in homelessness, housing, and legal services describe the challenges that monolingual Latinx households have in the rental market, where language barriers put them at risk of misunderstanding and violating rental agreements. Undocumented and mixed-status households face additional challenges, where even when they are aware of their rights as tenants, they may fear exercising them. Elderly noncitizens were characterized as uniquely vulnerable—less likely to have working income or to be eligible for public benefits.

### Indigenous

Finally, one paper highlights factors driving Indigenous homelessness. Exploring urban homelessness in Seattle, Bruey (2019) describes displacement of Native peoples through corporate development in the city. Importantly. Bruey argues that homelessness resulting from development-induced displacement is *caused* by corporate actors, not natural market dynamics or the individual vulnerabilities of poor Native individuals and families.

## Services

Recent studies pay increased attention to differences in intervention outcomes by race. The use of more widely available administrative data sets on service use and large-scale, federally funded evaluations to examine the degree of service use, service and system effectiveness, qualitative program feedback, and racism and discrimination within services.

### Degree of service use

Recent research demonstrates greater service use among people of color. Among individuals who were homeless in Philadelphia at the time of their death, White people were less likely to have made substantial use of homeless services (Metraux et al., 2016). Black adults participating in a wrap-around program were more likely than White participants to seek employment services (Brown et al., 2019). Among national samples of veterans reporting housing instability, Native men, Black men, and Native women had the highest rates of VHA homeless service program use, Asian/Pacific Islander men had the lowest, and White people generally made briefer use of VA homeless service programs (Montgomery et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2016; Tsai & Byrne, 2019). Black and Latinx youth experiencing homelessness in urban areas were more likely than White youth to use or seek services for general health, employment, and mental health (Crosby et al., 2018; Curry et al., 2016; Parast et al., 2019), shelter and housing (Curry et al., 2016; Parast et al., 2019; Pedersen et al., 2018; Yoonsook et al., 2018), education (Curry et al., 2016; Parast et al., 2019), and legal assistance (Parast et al., 2019). For example, among youth using a drop-in center in a West coast city, Black youth were two to three times more likely to use each type of in-person service than White youth (Curry et al., 2016).

### Effectiveness

Despite greater service use among people of color experiencing homelessness, research to understand the effectiveness of those services has more varied results.

Using administrative data from homeless services in eight communities, race was not a predictor of exit destination for single adults, and inconclusive for families; Black young adults, however, were 69% more likely to exit back into homelessness than White youth (Olivet et al., 2018). In a 3-year study of transitional shelter for formerly homeless adults with serious mental illness, race was not predictive of length of stay or housing status (Schnitzer et al., 2021). Among people who received rapid rehousing (RRH; a short-term housing subsidy), Black adults had significantly greater odds of exiting into permanent housing (Brown et al., 2018). Another study found no racial differences in wait time to exit homelessness using such a subsidy, but Black and Latinx youth were more likely to be "pending" in the system (Hsu et al., 2019). Brown et al. (2018) argue that further research is needed to understand the effect of RRH for long-term outcomes, as these subsidies expire and Black individuals have shown higher rates of return to homelessness after receiving similar subsidies (Brown et al., 2018).

Two studies examined permanent (nonexpiring) housing subsidies. Among families given priority access to Housing Choice Vouchers, there were no differences between White and Black families in lease-up rates, exit rates, or future housing instability over 3 years (Solari et al., 2021). However, a study examining housing satisfaction among Black renters found that those who received Housing Choice Vouchers lived in more distressed neighborhoods than those doubling up or in supportive housing (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2016), indicating a potential need to combat housing discrimination against Black residents using vouchers. Four studies found positive effects of PSH (permanent housing subsidies accompanied by social services). Black residents of scattered site supportive housing were satisfied with the buildings they lived in (Palmer, 2016), 6 months of residency in a project-based Housing First program flattened disparities in hospitalization between Black residents and other racial groups (Savino et al., 2021), and participants' experiences of assault (Petering et al., 2021) and racial discrimination decreased after 6 months in PSH (Wenzel et al., 2019).

Due to limited funding, communities are not able to provide housing interventions like RRH, PSH, and Housing Choice Vouchers to everyone who needs them. HUD requires the use of a standardized assessment to help homelessness response systems allocate limited resources, and two studies examined these tools for potential inequities by race. Research on the Self-Sufficiency Matrix found no significant differences by race for single adults (Cummings & Brown, 2019), but a study examining the VI-SPDAT, a very widely used tool, found that Black people, on average, received lower scores and were therefore less likely to be prioritized to housing (Cronley, 2020). Since the publishing of this study and similar technical reports from communities, some systems have been working on adjusting their tools to reduce disparities.

### Program feedback

CRT principles remind social scientists to center the voices of people of color. Qualitative feedback from people of color using homeless services highlights ways to improve the programs and systems. Native Hawaiian youth who were experiencing homelessness as new parents described the need for transportation, shelters that could keep families together regardless of gender and age, and programs that incorporated their language and traditions (Aparicio et al., 2019). In two midwestern studies, one with Native women and one with Black women, peer support was highlighted as a facilitator to positive outcomes (Dressel et al., 2020; Farley, 2016; Moxley & Washington, 2016a, 2016b). The importance of hiring people with lived experience was further supported by evaluation of a peer mentor program for veterans; those who benefited were more likely to be people of color and more often had a mentor who identified as a person of color (Resnik et al., 2017). Finally, although Chinchilla and Gabrielian (2019) did not interview people using services, informants working in services highlighted the need for outreach in health centers and churches, greater language inclusion, shelters that allow families to stay together, and more provider competency around immigrant needs and rights.

### Racism and discrimination in services

New research explicitly examines the impact of racism and discrimination across homeless services. Among individuals who became homeless after substance use treatment, decreased drug use was associated with greater program cultural competency, specifically programs with greater involvement in and outreach to communities of color (Guerrero et al., 2018). Research at a youth program revealed how White staff, Board, and volunteers often held deficit-oriented views about Black parents, blaming them for their children's homelessness (Pavlakis, 2021). Deficit language was also present in policy documents that positioned the organization as a "savior" to youth of color (Pavlakis, 2021, p. 14). Native people experiencing homelessness in urban Minnesota described discrimination by providers as a barrier to service use (Wille et al., 2017). Similarly, in Washington State, perceived racial stigma from service providers predicted higher levels of service avoidance (Weisz & Quinn, 2018). In family shelters in California, Black mothers felt stereotyped as drug users or aggressive, Latinx mothers described facing xenophobia, and both reported greater surveillance than White mothers (Reppond & Bullock, 2020). In a quantitative study of CPS referrals experienced by families in shelter, Black families were disproportionately referred to CPS, but race was *not* associated with substantiations of neglect or

abuse or subsequent child removals (Rodriguez & Shinn, 2016).

## Policy

Homeless services are guided by policy, and policies influencing access to housing and income influence homelessness rates. The following studies discuss racial inequities in homelessness education policy, laws that criminalize homelessness and perpetuate it, and the potential of income support policies to reduce racial disparities.

### Homeless education policy

Ethnographic research with Black youth in Chicago and Los Angeles (Aviles de Bradley, 2015; Edwards, 2020) examine barriers to accessing school-based McKinney-Vento resources (federally mandated resources for students experiencing homelessness), document school-level racism, and highlight how structural conditions external to school impact youth's experiences. School personnel shied away from conversations about race despite clear racial disparities in homelessness (Aviles de Bradley, 2015). Due to racial disparities in disciplinary treatment, students did not trust staff and believed they would call CPS if they disclosed their housing status, leading to reduced help-seeking (Edwards, 2020). Aviles de Bradley and Edwards call for McKinney-Vento policy to include explicit language on addressing racial inequities. In another Los Angeles study, students actively resisted dominant narratives about Black youth homelessness, including parental blame and the need for a savior (Ellis & Geller, 2016). Their "counterstories" included a strong desire for supportive relationships with adults, including helping professionals, but past service experiences were negative. Youth often saw themselves as "housing unstable" but not "homeless," despite meeting McKinney-Vento eligibility criteria for homelessness, highlighting the need for thoughtful outreach.

### Criminalization

The criminalization of homelessness refers to policies, laws, and ordinances that make it illegal for people living unhoused to engage in basic activities in public spaces. Building on research that shows how arrest and incarceration exacerbate homelessness, Herring et al. (2019) demonstrated how seemingly lesser "pervasive penality" practices (move-along orders, property removal, and citations) perpetuate homelessness by creating debt, hindering employment, and causing psychological distress. People of color were also cited, searched, and had property taken at higher rates than did White participants (e.g., 76% of Black participants were cited compared to 66% of White). The study highlights how criminalization perpetuates homelessness instead of reducing it, with greater impact on people of color. Wooten (2021) describes how, for Black men registered as sex offenders, racialized poverty interacts with hypersurveillance and restrictions to housing and shelter post-release to lead them into perpetual homelessness, unable to heal and re-enter society.

### Income support

Finally, Parolin (2021) examined the impact of cash assistance from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) on levels of student homelessness and found that reduction effects were particularly strong in school districts with more Black and Native students. The findings support the idea that barriers to cash assistance across states have a disparate impact on families of color, and policy to increase income supports can reduce family homelessness and its racial inequities.

## Activism and theory

Social movements push for policy change, and grassroots collectives often work beyond the state to foster community-driven responses to housing deprivation and poverty. In addition, theory development can reveal how racial inequities across multiple systems are connected to underlying ideologies, politics, and economic forces. I summarize studies on activism and theory together because they overlapped and shared common implications.

Hufnagel (2021) presents a timeline of antipoverty organizing. Starting with the 1968 Poor People's Campaign, she traces how national organizing for racial justice, welfare rights, Indigenous rights, and ending poverty and homelessness joined forces over the last 50 years. Movements were most successful when campaigns centered on multiracial working-class solidarity and spanned multiple issues. Hufnagel examines the conditions that gave birth to the National Homeless Union, and by doing so describes conditions that led to the rise of homelessness in the 1980s. Compared to other research reviewed, Hufnagel is the only one to describe attacks on unions and the growth of finance capital as key. Reflecting on this period, she also writes, "the hypervisibility of Black poverty was a double-edged sword" (p. 198). On the one hand, disproportionality could provide fodder for action. On the other hand, it could fuel images of a Black "culture of poverty," where the "undeserving poor" are framed as responsible for their own suffering, pushing poor White people towards race solidarity over class action. This analysis has relevance to the hesitance of homelessness researchers to emphasize racial inequities during this period. Later, she describes how the War on Drugs destabilized organizing, but a reignited Poor People's Campaign (2018 and onward) has provided new support for homeless unions.

Two other studies focus on recent, local activism. Dozier (2019) presents ethnographic and archival research examining grassroots organizations challenging gentrification-induced policing in Skid Row, Los Angeles. Organizers, homeless residents, and legal advocates highlight intersections of racism and homelessness to resist antihomeless policing and displacement. Activists who shouted, "No Jim Crow in Skid Row!" pointed to the ways in which the dispossession and destruction of belongings, including IDs, medication, laptops, and tents, rendered people experiencing homelessness (predominately Black) as second-class citizens. Dozier drew on Ananya Roy's (2017) concept of racial banishment to argue that gentrification-induced policing has the *specific aim* of displacing Black homeless residents.

Elwood and Lawson (2020) explore the creative activism of Real Change, a grassroots organization for housing, economic, and racial justice in Seattle. The authors analyze direct actions—a coffin at a city council meeting, thousands of empty shoes in a gentrified public plaza, and publicly displaced portraits of unhoused community members. They draw on "poverty politics," a theoretical framework for understanding the politics behind who is seen as poor, what causes poverty, and what should be done about it (Lawson & Elwood, 2018). Under this framework, "thinkable" poverty politics are the dominant narratives that poverty is caused by individual failings, and that solutions rely on self-improvement. On the other hand, "unthinkable" poverty politics are those that challenge dominant narratives, shifting focus to the structural conditions that produce both poverty and affluence and to imagining different futures. This concept originates from critical race feminism and critical geographies arguments (Cacho, 2012; Pulido, 2017) that "existing political economic orders and systems of social valuation, such as middle-class normativity, white supremacy, racial capitalism, and propertied citizenship depend upon deep sustained devaluation of impoverished people, racialized groups, undocumented immigrants and other 'Others'" (Elwood & Lawson, 2020, p. 8). Elwood and Lawson conclude that Real Change creates the conditions for "unthinkable" politics by emphasizing, in action, how poverty is caused by the decisions of those in power.

Wooten (2021) described above for its attention to policies perpetuating homelessness for Black men registered as sex offenders, draws on Black geography and Black feminist thought to analyze larger urban development trends, and how these forces to protect white privilege and white supremacy. When a participant tries to return home to stay with his mother, he finds their home has been redeveloped into luxury housing. Sleeping out of doors nearby lands him a trespassing citation. Wooten analyzes this through McKittrick's (2011) concept of urbicide, wherein urban change *intentionally* displaces and hurts the life chances of Black and Brown urban dwellers to create homes and lives for White residents.

Finally, Laster Pirtle (2020) explains how racial capitalism drives inequities across racial groups in the US. Racial capitalism, first introduced by Robinson (1983), is the idea that capital accumulation and racism go hand in hand. The economic system of capitalism, beginning with slavery, colonialism, and genocide, depends on the social construction of race and the subsequent devaluing of certain lives along racial lines. Laster Pirtle describes how racial capitalism leads to health inequities for Black people in Michigan, from Flint's water crisis to disproportionate coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) infection and death, to the unique inequities facing Black people experiencing homelessness in Detroit. She writes, "Homelessness is another way that racial capitalism puts the poor, older, and families of color at increased risk for consequences of COVID-19. How can a person even shelter in place with no shelter?" (p. 2). Racial capitalism set the stage for racial inequities in homelessness, and it is on this stage that other harms are intensified.

## DISCUSSION

This paper synthesized social science literature on race and homelessness in the United States. Until relatively recently, researchers had approached homelessness through a mostly color-blind lens. Several literature reviews and commentaries were exceptions and acknowledged how racism and discrimination across systems of housing, employment, wealth, welfare, and criminal justice led people of color to be at greater risk of homelessness. Around 2016, increased national attention to structural racism was reflected in the homelessness field. A systematic review by Jones (2016) helps summarize the research before this period, and I drew on that review as well as other scholarship to present Part 1, synthesizing and reflecting on research on race and homelessness before 2016. Next, Part 2 presented a systematic scoping review of research published from 2016 to 2021, taking a broader approach than Jones and looking closely at the nature of research on race and homelessness. I asked whether social science research kept pace with the rising attention to racial equity outside of peer-reviewed journals. My simple answer is yes; 90 studies met my inclusion criteria across 6 years of recent research, compared to 34 studies across 30 years reviewed by Jones (2016). To conclude, I summarize the insights from recent academic research and suggest how future work might extend our understandings and more critically analyze disparities, their causes, and efforts towards equity.

## Characteristics of people experiencing homelessness

Early research demonstrated that Black and Indigenous people are at greatest risk of homelessness, and recent

research confirms the persistence of these trends (e.g., Fusaro et al., 2018; Montgomery et al., 2020; Morton et al., 2012, 2019). New research also provides better understanding of Latinx homelessness: measures not limited to shelter use or visible street homelessness, such as screeners in health care settings (Montgomery et al., 2020), referral by school personnel (Evangelist & Shaefer, 2020), and self-report surveys show higher rates (Haskett et al., 2020). A few studies documented lower rates of health issues among people of color experiencing homelessness compared to White people experiencing homelessness (e.g., Flentje et al., 2017), but trauma and distress were common and at least one study connected mental health concerns to and racial discrimination (Gattis & Larson, 2016). People of color who are homeless have reported more social support than their White counterparts (e.g., Brown et al., 2020), but research also depicts strained social ties resulting from systemic oppression (e.g., Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2017). Interventions must address housing and economic barriers, but they should not ignore the health consequences of poverty and housing deprivation.

Future quantitative research should continue to examine the nature of homelessness among Latinx communities. No quantitative studies in the review examined the heterogeneity of racial/ethnic subgroups. Across the United States, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities have higher poverty rates than Asian people overall, and Puerto Ricans, Guatemalans, and Mexicans have higher rates than Hispanics overall (Noe-Bustamente et al., 2019). Current data on homelessness fail to adequately account for the prevalence of homelessness among those who are Black *and* Latinx or Indigenous *and* Latinx. Additionally, while immigrants may face barriers to housing and service use, there is some evidence that Black immigrants have relatively better health (Griffith et al., 2011), higher socioeconomic status (Manuel et al., 2012), and different housing outcomes (Argeros, 2013) than Black people born in the United States or identifying as African American. Future research on homelessness should be based on an understanding of these potential differences, and qualitative methods can be used when sampling issues limit some quantitative research on smaller subgroups.

## Causes

Early research set the groundwork for understanding that racial inequities in homelessness are a symptom of racism. Scholars studied the economic and political dynamics of racial inequality and connected these unjust systems to homelessness. New research is characterized by qualitative methods, with people of color describing their pathways into homelessness as influenced by racism and discrimination (e.g., Paul et al., 2020). Homelessness is both racialized and gendered, with intersectional

analyses revealing additive risk for women of color (e.g., Bullock et al., 2020). Frameworks of structural racism and CRT were used to connect microlevel events to macrolevel forces, emphasizing structural disadvantage over individual, family, or community deficits (e.g., Olivet et al., 2021). One study modeled the influence of self-reported discrimination on homelessness, providing quantitative evidence for racism's role (Otiniano Verissimo et al., 2021).

Future research should use quantitative methods to further model the impact of racism on homelessness rates. Although causal models of homelessness integrate individual and structural factors, most empirical research is on individual correlates and, as a result, offers limited explanations for racial differences. Carter (2011) aimed to examine the impact of structural factors on Black homelessness rates, but due to lack of area-level data on homelessness at the time of his study, he used overcrowding as a proxy. Researchers have since used HUD's data on homelessness to examine how housing, economic, and other area-level factors contribute to homelessness rates. Future research should examine how these mechanisms contribute to racial inequities. Results from research of this nature can inform services, community organizing, and policy efforts to reduce racial disparities by focusing on homelessness prevention.

## Services

Research on homelessness interventions was limited until recently. New work suggests that people of color seek support to exit homelessness (often at higher rates than White people), and services can both perpetuate and mitigate racial inequities. For example, housing subsidies work to end homelessness for Black people (e.g., Solari et al., 2021), but systems for allocating these subsidies may advantage White people (Cronley, 2020). Further, access to rental support may not have the power to combat discrimination in the housing market, potentially leading to returns to homelessness (Brown et al., 2017; Dickson-Gomez et al., 2016). Qualitative studies highlight the need for language accessibility and shelters that allow families to stay together (e.g., Aparicio et al., 2019; Chinchilla & Gabrielian, 2019). Several studies demonstrate the need for interventions to address service provider bias (e.g., Reppond & Bullock, 2020; Weisz & Quinn, 2018).

Future research should explore ways to allocate resources in a way that advances racial equity. For example, equity-oriented frameworks for distributing scarce medical interventions describe how, because of persistent racial residential segregation, zip code can be used as a proxy for prioritizing communities of color (when legal frameworks prevent using a person's race) (Shinn & Richard, 2022). There was little evidence related to the efficacy of interventions for racial groups

beyond Black and White. Future research should address this gap. This may be especially needed for Indigenous communities, who are vastly overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness. Homelessness response systems in areas with large Native populations should study the efficacy of interventions and factors that contribute to sustained positive outcomes. Research of this nature has taken place in Canada (e.g., Alaazi et al., 2015), but is more limited in the United States. However, research must be aligned with the goals and methods of Indigenous researchers, and ideally lead by Indigenous communities.

## Policy

New qualitative research in schools points to the importance of centering racial equity in homeless education policy, drawing on CRT and structural racism frameworks to call for policy language that explicitly acknowledges racial inequities and requires efforts to address them (e.g., Aviles de Bradley, 2015; Edwards, 2020). Policies that criminalize homelessness and limit housing opportunities for people with records highlight how systemic racism in the criminal justice systems contributes to racial inequities in homelessness (e.g., Herring et al., 2019). New quantitative research examining the impact of TANF expenditures on student homelessness builds on prior research emphasizing how attacks on social welfare led to increased homelessness among people of color (Parolin, 2021). Today, efforts to bolster the safety net can help prevent homelessness and reduce racial inequities.

Future research can examine the impact of different policies on homelessness rates using HUD's data on homelessness, which includes single adults and families without school-age children. To move from describing to addressing inequities, computational research can explore policy changes that make the greatest impact on rates of homelessness for people of color. If some policies, such as criminal justice barriers on the rental market, cause a disparate impact, what changes would cause a *reparative* impact? For example, research can examine the impact of national investments in housing and income supports, and they can also analyze the impact of local planning efforts designed with racial reparation in mind (e.g., Thurber et al., 2021).

## Activism and theory

Drawing on scholarship in Black geographies, Black feminist thought, CRT, and Black studies, included articles offer ways to understand how political, economic, and cultural systems create the conditions for homelessness and its racial inequities. Roy's (2017) concept of racial banishment emphasizes the violence of homelessness and residential displacement, and it calls for a centering of race in the analysis of gentrification and the criminalization of people experiencing homelessness. McKittrick's concept of urbicide McKittrick, 2011 casts a light on the powerful actors that cause homelessness instead of those who experience it. Poverty politics (Elwood & Lawson, 2020) explains how dominant narratives of poverty and homelessness as individual failings work to the benefit of white supremacy; shifting focus to structural forces can lead to more effective homelessness prevention. The notion of racial capitalism (Robinson, 2018) maintains that racial disparities in homelessness are not an unintentional consequence or glitch in our economic system, but rather a result of its inherent structure. Finally, while mainstream homelessness research, policy, and services may be at the beginning of a focus on racial justice, research on activism shows that these efforts have long centered racial equity and cross-issue approaches (Dozier, 2019; Hufnagel, 2021).

Future homelessness research can draw on these frameworks to understand and critically discuss the root causes of racial inequities in homelessness and highlight the role of community organizing to help drive structural change and address the harm the racial capitalism causes to communities of color. For example, applied researchers can follow the model of urban planners who use Black geographies and CRT as "planning texts" to inform community-based planning for racial justice (Brand, 2018, p. 269). In doing so, they draw on academic scholarship to push their field towards equity-oriented practice.

## CONCLUSION

This paper reviews the state of multidisciplinary research on homelessness and race. CRTs remind researchers that differences in "race" reveal manifestations of racism. Therefore, race matters in addressing homelessness because racism matters in addressing homelessness. Systems of advantage based on race shape risk for homelessness and effectiveness of homelessness interventions. To fully understand and address homelessness, it is necessary to understand barriers to housing for people of color and acknowledge advantages for White individuals and families. Research that centers on racism can inform policy reform under our current economic system, like greater investments for income supports, affordable housing, and a more equitable homeless service system. It can also contribute to critical conversations on housing and economic justice that envision greater social change.

Finally, scholars who write about racial inequities in homelessness to inform solutions must consider non-academic sources of knowledge. This paper reviewed academic research, but the findings reaffirm the

importance of nondominant forms of knowledge production. CRT principles can help guide these efforts, as can approaches shared by decolonial scholars (e.g., Dutta, 2018; Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2014). As a starting place, accessible sources of broader knowledge include online nonpeer-reviewed reports co-authored by people experiencing homelessness (e.g., After Echo Lake Park Research Collective, 2022), written statements from collectives of people experiencing homelessness (e.g., Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing, n.d.), podcasts featuring formerly homeless advocates (e.g., *Alchemy of Housing Justice, NCH Voices of Homelessness*), and meetings of organizations fighting for economic, housing, and racial justice (e.g., local and national chapters of the Poor People's Campaign, Black Lives Matter, National Homeless Union, Homes for All, and local tenant unions).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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