

RACISM AND HOMELESSNESS

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For many people, Jeff Olivet, of the Center for Social Innovation in Needham, Massachusetts, is known as the expert on the history of homelessness. His thoughtful research has revealed that war, natural disaster, and poverty have been the root causes of homelessness. Now he has turned his attention to the link between racism and homelessness.

Just venture into encampments and shelters and you will see that, as Jeff explains, "people of color are dramatically over-represented among Americans experiencing homelessness, even when controlling for poverty. Such disparity is the result of ongoing discrimination in housing, jobs, and criminal justice."

At our 2016 National Zarrow Mental Health Symposium, Jeff and Marc Dones, also of the Center for Social Innovation, will teach service providers, policy makers, and advocates how they can become agents of change who spark thoughtful dialogue about racism and homelessness and how we can all work to improve this dire situation within our organizations and communities.

Jeff recently took time out to answer a few of our questions. He brought to the interview his expertise honed as a street outreach worker, case manager, housing director, coalition builder, writer, teacher, and activist. His work with hundreds of organizations across the United States and internationally has helped to improve strategic planning, organizational management, and implementation of evidence-based practices.

Q: When you look at a timeline of the history of homelessness, can you point to the period when racism began playing a role in people ending up on the streets?

A: I'm not sure you can point to one thing, but you can point to a few key moments. You could point to the Trail of Tears and uprooting of Native American people as a policy of creating massive homelessness, and taking people off their land and disrupting tribes that had been in the same place for hundreds if not thousands of years. Also, runaway and freed slaves in the pre-Civil War period usually did end up homeless in the northern states. Right after the Civil War we began to see newly freed slaves who were literally homeless during the Civil War following the Union Army around and creating camps and that sort of thing. Then we saw waves of migration from the south to the north and the west. The great migration started in the 1880s and went on through the 1950s and '60s. And the ghettoization of big cities oppressed African Americans and created the groundwork for what we see now.

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Q: Race in our country has reached a point unrivaled for decades in America, especially after the tragedies that have claimed the lives of African Americans and police officers. As heartbreaking as these events have been, is this actually an ideal time to take action on racism and homelessness?

A: There is a national discussion about how to end homelessness, and increasing awareness of the role of racism. If you think about it as a Venn diagram waiting to happen, there is a homelessness circle and there is a racism circle, and there has been very little overlap between those two dialogs. I think the timing is absolutely right to bring those two discussions together.

Communities should work to try to really understand how discrimination and housing and employment and criminal justice and other systems play into homelessness. In other words, how does racial discrimination drive the disproportionate number of people of color in the homeless population? And how do racism and discrimination prevent people of color from exiting homelessness, or keep them cycling back through homelessness episodically? How do we create a strategy to promote racial equity in access to housing and services so that we can begin to decrease the high proportion of people of color who experience homelessness?

Q: So, what is the solution?

A: One basic solution is to enforce the Fair Housing Act, and the fair housing laws that have been on the books since 1968. We know from multiple studies in recent years that landlords still don't sell people of color the same number of units, they tell people nothing is available when it is, and they charge more. There's a lot of overt and covert discrimination that happens. I think assertively trying to increase employment opportunities for people of color, for young people of color, can go a long way in preventing future homelessness. Then I think continuing to focus on mass incarceration of black men and boys. We also need to look at re-entry programs in a very thoughtful way to prevent homelessness among African Americans who

are being transitioned from the jail and prisons back into the community, so we can make sure they don't become homeless in that process.

Q: Tell me about your initiative to research racism and homelessness.

A: We have funding from a number of funders who are supporting communities to join us in a mixed methods research study where we do quantitative number crunching to understand the size and scope of the problem, but also qualitative storytelling where we will interview 200 people of color who have experienced homelessness. We want to try to understand their experiences of discrimination prior to their homelessness, but also during and after. For the action aspect of the initiative, we're doing community training where we're pulling teams from these communities that will begin to create interventions.

They can move the needle on the disproportionality of people of color in the homeless population. We are connecting those 10 communities through a virtual learning community over several months to teach each other what they are doing.

Q: When you speak in public, including the Zarrow Mental Health Symposium, what are the key things that you want them to remember most?

A: The high rates of homelessness among people of color are no accidents. They are the direct result of policy decisions we have made over the years. Second, they can do something about it. They can initiate anti-racism work within their own organizations and within their own communities. Everyone has a part to play in that. They can make a difference beyond their organizations and their community in working with landlords, the criminal justice system, and working with employers to begin creating equal opportunity for people of color so they don't experience homelessness at such high rates.