

The Autistic People *of* Color Fund



Autism, Race, and Housing Justice

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Note: Because we're based in the United States and are most familiar with U.S. laws and policy, our data and recommendations reflect that. But as we expand our reach, we plan to include more information about international laws and policies.

Whether drawing from personal recollections or looking at recent research on the homeless, it is undeniable how central disability is to the lives of many homeless people. —Angela Lemus-Mogrovejo, “Homelessness Is a Disability Justice Issue”

About the Community Priorities Brief Series

In our 2022 Community Priorities Policies Report, our survey respondents chose education, employment, food justice, housing, and health as their top policy priorities. In this series of briefs, the Fund will identify current shortcomings and suggest solutions to ensure that autistic people of color can thrive as fully integrated members of the community.

Facts about Autism, Race, and Homelessness

In “Homelessness Is a Disability Justice Issue,” Angela Lemus-Mogrovejo writes, “Whether drawing from personal recollections or looking at recent research on the homeless, it is undeniable how central disability is to the lives of many homeless people.”¹ According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, unaffordable housing and poverty are the primary causes of homelessness.² Disabled people in the United States are more likely to be unemployed or dependent on public benefits like Social

¹ Lemus-Mogrovejo, A. (2018, October 9). “Homelessness Is a Disability Justice Issue.” Rooted in Rights. <https://rootedinrights.org/homelessness-is-a-disability-justice-issue/>

² National Coalition for the Homeless, “Homelessness in America.” National Coalition for the Homeless. <https://nationalhomeless.org/about-homelessness/>

Security, preventing them from having the income they need to pay for market-rate housing—and increasing the risk that they may become homeless.³

Given the preexisting risks, what does all this mean for autistic people of color? It means that autistic people of color are probably at higher risk of homelessness than their white and nondisabled counterparts. Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people—autistic or not—are overrepresented in the U.S. homeless population.⁴ According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD, about 1% of the sheltered homeless population is Asian, though HUD’s data don’t distinguish between different Asian ethnicities, such as Indian, Chinese, Hmong, or Vietnamese.⁵ Autistic adults are more likely to be socially isolated, have psychiatric disabilities, and have less education than neurotypical adults, and all these disparities increase the likelihood of homelessness and poverty.⁶ A British study from 2018 suggests that autistic people may be overrepresented in homeless populations—12% of the homeless people the researchers interviewed were autistic, compared with about 1% of the general population.⁷ The compound effects of racism and ableism exclude autistic people of

³ Ward, A. (2022, January 21). The Right to Adequate Housing: Disabled Individuals in the United States. *Immigration and Human Rights Law Review*. <https://lawblogs.uc.edu/ihr/r/2022/01/21/the-right-to-adequate-housing-disabled-individuals-in-the-united-states/>

⁴ Fazel, S., Geddes, J. R., & Kushel, M. (2014). The health of homeless people in high-income countries: descriptive epidemiology, health consequences, and clinical and policy recommendations. *Lancet* (London, England), 384(9953), 1529–1540. [doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)61132-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61132-6); U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. *The 2021 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. Part 1: Point-in-Time Estimates of Sheltered Homelessness*. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2021-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>; Miami School of Law Human Rights Clinic & National Homelessness Law Center (2022). Racial injustice in housing and homelessness in the United States.

⁵ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. *The 2021 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. Part 1: Point-in-Time Estimates of Sheltered Homelessness*. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2021-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

⁶ Churchard, A., Ryder, M., Greenhill, A., & Mandy, W. (2019). The prevalence of autistic traits in a homeless population. *Autism: the international journal of research and practice*, 23(3), 665–676. doi.org/10.1177/1362361318768484

⁷ Churchard, A., Ryder, M., Greenhill, A., & Mandy, W. (2019). The prevalence of autistic traits in a homeless population. *Autism: the international journal of research and practice*, 23(3), 665–676. doi.org/10.1177/1362361318768484

color from the workplace, isolate them from informal systems of support, and prevent them from getting help through formal channels.

A disproportionate number of unsheltered homeless people have disabilities.⁸ In many jurisdictions, police fine and arrest people who set up tents in public spaces, lie on benches, ask passersby for spare change, and sit on street corners.⁹ Since chronically homeless disabled people are more likely to be unsheltered, they are at higher risk of being fined or jailed for sleeping rough.¹⁰ According to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, “Some people who experience chronic homelessness seem to be caught in a revolving door of incarceration, crisis services, and life on the streets or in emergency shelters.”¹¹ For autistic people of color, this is particularly dangerous, given that they are already at higher risk of police violence because of their race. Adding homelessness into the mix heightens the threat. Furthermore, these punitive measures merely hide homelessness; they don’t solve the underlying problems—unemployment, housing shortages, unaffordable housing—that cause people to sleep outdoors and set up encampments in the first place.¹²

⁸ Paode, P. 2020. “Housing for Adults with Autism And/or Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: Shortcomings of Federal Programs.” *ResearchGate*. Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Center for Public Policy. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Pooja-Paode/publication/346041472_Housing_for_Adults_with_Autism_andor_Intellectual_and_Developmental_Disabilities_Shortcomings_of_Federal_Programs/links/5fb8202c92851c933f47f1eb/Housing-for-Adults-with-Autism-and-or-Intellectual-and-Developmental-Disabilities-Shortcomings-of-Federal-Programs.pdf.

⁹ The National Homelessness Law Center (2021). Housing Not Handcuffs. <https://housingnohandcuffs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HNH-One-Pager-June-2021-1.pdf>

¹⁰ Ward, A. (2022, January 21). The Right to Adequate Housing: Disabled Individuals in the United States. *Immigration and Human Rights Law Review*. <https://lawblogs.uc.edu/ihr/r/2022/01/21/the-right-to-adequate-housing-disabled-individuals-in-the-united-states/>

¹¹ United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (August 2018). Homelessness in America: Focus on Chronic Homelessness Among People with Disabilities. United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Homelessness-in-America-Focus-on-chronic.pdf

¹² The National Homelessness Law Center (2021). Housing Not Handcuffs. <https://housingnohandcuffs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HNH-One-Pager-June-2021-1.pdf>

To add insult to injury, many services intended to alleviate homelessness are inaccessible to autistic people. Here's why:

- Emergency shelters bombard their residents with overwhelming crowds, noise, and other intense sensory stimuli. These shelters afford very little space for autistic people to decompress after this sensory onslaught.¹³
- Shelter staff may contribute to sensory overload through pat-downs and other invasive security measures.¹⁴
- Staff may not have training about autism or other disabilities.
- Some shelters force their clients to leave the building during the day, often with nowhere to go to relax during the day. If there are no day programs or other free activities available, autistic homeless people must fend for themselves without support.

But even at their best, emergency shelters are a temporary solution, a stopgap for people in dire straits. They cannot provide the long-term support—disability benefits, employment, supportive housing, home- and community-based services—that people need to be fully integrated in their communities.

Policy Solutions to End Homelessness among Autistic People of Color

The Autistic People of Color Fund calls for a systemic approach to ending, and not merely alleviating, homelessness. To ensure that autistic people of color are safely housed, policymakers must take into account the relationships between race, class,

¹³ Churchard, A., Ryder, M., Greenhill, A., & Mandy, W. (2019). The prevalence of autistic traits in a homeless population. *Autism : the international journal of research and practice*, 23(3), 665–676. doi.org/10.1177/1362361318768484

¹⁴ Thomas, E.V. & Vercruyse, C. (2019, June 14). Homelessness among individuals with disabilities: influential factors and scalable solutions. *NACCHO Voice*, National Association of County and City Health Officials. <https://www.naccho.org/blog/articles/homelessness-among-individuals-with-disabilities-influential-factors-and-scalable-solutions>

disability, and health. For example, some jurisdictions have adopted Housing First programs, which provide chronically homeless people with supportive housing, rather than forcing them to go through emergency shelter first.¹⁵ Housing First programs dispense with the restrictive rules that some shelters and transitional housing programs use. Instead, they focus on what homeless people need the most: a roof over their heads. Although these programs are geared toward the chronically homeless—people who have been homeless for a year or more—they can be expanded to support people who have recently lost their housing.

Ending homelessness also includes prevention. For those at risk of losing their housing, there should be supports available to help them pay their rent or mortgage, move into affordable units, find sustainable work, or apply for cash benefits to make sure that they never become homeless in the first place.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand affordable-housing programs—for example, federal Section 8 subsidies—for people with disabilities.
- Provide in-home support for autistic people who struggle to maintain their housing. For example, executive-functioning problems can make it more difficult to keep a house or apartment clean, which can lead to eviction or other adverse consequences.
- Train shelter staff, case managers, and other direct-service providers to support autistic clients, as well as people with other disabilities.
- Conduct research on the relationship between autism and homelessness. These studies should oversample autistic people of color.

¹⁵ Thomas, E.V. & Vercruyse, C. (2019, June 14). Homelessness among individuals with disabilities: influential factors and scalable solutions. *NACCHO Voice*, National Association of County and City Health Officials. <https://www.naccho.org/blog/articles/homelessness-among-individuals-with-disabilities-influential-factors-and-scalable-solutions>



The Autistic People *of* Color Fund

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