People of Color and Homelessness

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BACKGROUND

Homelessness emerged as a national issue in the 1870’s (Kusmer, 2002). At that time in American history, African-Americans made up less than 10% of the population and although there were no national figures documenting the demography of the homeless population, some facts suggest that African-Americans represented a very small segment of the homeless population. As a matter of fact, in the 1950s and 1960s, the typical person experiencing homelessness was white, male, and in his 50s (Kusmer, 2002).

Since that time, though, the scope of the problem and the makeup of the population has dramatically changed. Not only do families with children now compose 40% of the homeless population, but 49% of the population is African American. The composition of the average homeless family is a single parent household headed by an African-American female (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2004).

DEMOGRAPHICS AND TRENDS

- People of color – particularly African-Americans – are a disproportionately large percentage of the homeless population. The U.S. Conference of Mayors 2004 study, the urban homeless population is estimated to be 49% African-American, 35% white, 13% Latino, two percent Native American and one percent Asian (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2004).

- Like the total U.S. population, though, the ethnic makeup of homeless populations varies according to geographic location. For example, people experiencing homelessness in rural areas are more likely to be white, female, married, currently working, homeless for the first time, and homeless for a shorter period of time (Fisher, 2005); homelessness among Native Americans and migrant workers is also largely a rural phenomenon.

- Many other urban communities cite similar or higher numbers. The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless reports that 77% of its total homeless population is African-American.

- The disparities between ethnicities in the U.S. population and the homeless population are striking. In 2004, the homeless population was 49% African-American, though African-American people made up only 12% U.S. adult population. The homeless population was only 35% white, though white people made up about 76% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2004).
• Approximately 33% of the male homeless population is veterans. Among this population about 46% are white, 56% are African-American or Latino (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2005). This contrasts with the homeless population who are not veterans, which is 34% white, generally younger and have a higher rate of completing high school or having a GED (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2005).

RECOMMENDATIONS

• To end homelessness and the overrepresentation of people of color experiencing homelessness, please support the Bringing America Home Campaign. This national, broad-based initiative is dedicated to the goal of ending homelessness in America. It is founded on the principles that people need affordable housing, livable incomes, health care, education, and protection of their civil rights and is composed of a variety of efforts that address these causes of homelessness.

The Bringing America Home Campaign is founded on the principles and action of public education, grassroots organizing and support for progressive policies and legislation. The success of the campaign depends upon the final and most important part of the solution, grassroots organizing. From slavery to the civil rights movement, grassroots organizing was the key element leading to success, and must be applied to ending homelessness in America.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) . Homelessness: Programs and the People They Serve. 1999.