Where do I belong? Where is home?

Experiences of racism and homelessness

Summary

Contents

We warn readers that this report contains quotes and experiences from participants that may be upsetting or triggering for the reader. The content talks about overt and implicit racism, including physical and verbal attacks, experienced by people who we spoke to throughout the course of the research. If you feel unsafe, vulnerable or unwell whilst reading the report we urge you to stop reading and take steps to support your health, wellbeing and psychological safety.

Foreword

"In 2022 Crisis approached me to be a community researcher for their Racism and Homelessness research project, as I work within the Homeless community. It was important for me, that the methodologies used in the project would be as participatory and democratic as possible.

Working on a research project where community researchers are valued meant I felt assured that we would be working together towards social change; centering the knowledge offered by the community's lived experience ensures that the narratives and research are authentic and relevant.

Many of the experiences of the interviewees you will hear are traumatic, discriminatory, and awful. As awful and as violent as they are, as a peer researcher who is part of the global majority, I live my life knowing that racism can rear its ugly head at any, and the most unexpected of times.

These experiences of discrimination and racism — whether direct, indirect, or structural — affect people's relationships with organisations, society, and individuals. They frame our world. This is shown by the participants' reports of discriminatory incidents when accessing homeless services. This discrimination; can also intensify the reasons people from global majority communities become homeless in the UK.

This report is important as there have been few research studies, highlighting the links between race, ethnicity, and housing inequality. By shining a light on the challenges faced by these communities, we can make systems and organisations fairer through better practices. If bad practice is allowed to flourish, it can affect everyone, and maintain systems of oppression. Best practice means making systems better for all."

Dani

"I am a lived experience researcher and passionate about ending homelessness in the UK.

The research was needed to show how Black people in the UK are treated and the lack of support given to them depending on where they live.

I was motivated to get involved as it's time these issues are exposed and action is taken to ensure Black people have the same opportunities to get housed."

Andrea

"There is a real gap in existing research and understandings of homelessness and racism.

Many of the decision-makers, and leading researchers in the "field" who get to shape understandings of racism and homelessness don't necessarily have lived experiences, and this impacts on the way that they create policies, research, and representations that affect our lives. However, the lived experiences of racism and homelessness across communities 6 of colour and global majority folk can be vastly different and it takes all of us to do this work; anti-racism is a lifelong commitment.

Racism creates many of the conditions for housing precarity and homelessness, which disproportionately affects Black, people of colour, and global majority folk. When Pratichi from Crisis approached me about doing this research back in 2021, it spoke to the heaviness that my heart had been holding for a long time due to my lived experiences of racism and homelessness.

I took part in this work at a time when racist Covid-19 discourse from media and politicians led to increased violences towards East and Southeast Asians globally. As a trans, nonbinary, intersex, and disabled person of East Asian heritage taking part in this research, I wanted to make sure that intersections of identity including race, gender, sex, class, and disability were spoken about in this research.

This research is a much-needed project where people with lived experiences of racism and homelessness have some power to shape understandings and research about racism and homelessness. Listen to the participants. Listen to people with lived experience of racism and homelessness. There should be more work like this that is both participatory and moves us all towards action."

Si Long Chan

"As a long-standing campaigner, lived experience researcher, public speaker and media spokesperson on mental health, racism, discrimination, and homelessness. I possess a deep understanding of homelessness having done extensive outreach, interviews and fundraising in London, Kent and abroad.

I wanted to take a stand against homelessness and raise awareness of those regularly ignored and forgotten, including the Asian and disabled community. Before, during and after Covid I had horrific experiences trying to get housing support, and this motivated me to take action against stigma and discrimination, so that others wouldn't have similar experiences. At that time, there was no research available on homelessness, mental health and racism amongst ethnic minorities.

The rewarding part of this project is the journey of transformation of my negative experiences into something positive and valuable.

The public and others have preconceived ideas of homelessness, that it's a typical white, British, middle-aged man sleeping rough, misusing substances and that they are primarily to blame. Homelessness is a last resort and is usually never their fault.

There's a constant fear of the unknown when you're homeless. You're disoriented with no permanent residence. There's no structure, security and stability in your life and no sense of normality or humanity. This causes prolonged, irreversible damage to your physical and mental health, including severe PTSD. It is a vicious never-ending cycle difficult to escape.

Navigating homelessness services is more difficult and stressful when you're an ethnic minority, you are disabled, or you cannot communicate in English. Services do not make reasonable adjustments for religious and cultural barriers, disabilities and mental health issues. There's direct, indirect, and structural racism in the system itself. Many poor decisions and assumptions are made by those in power who do not possess the lived experience, so lack the basic understanding and empathy. The result of this discrimination and poor decisions can negatively impact people to the extent that they lose their lives.

Decision-makers must actively engage and be aware of these issues, and work together cross-sector alongside lived experience researchers to take immediate action to address this never-ending issue - because homeless people are humans too."

Tamanna Miah

Introduction

"I feel like we get the worst of the worst, to be honest."

Background and context

Homelessness is devastating, isolating, and dangerous. Evidence shows that people of colour are at a higher risk of homelessness than white people across Britain. There is little research on the experiences of homelessness for people from minoritised ethnic groups. There is also a gap in research on the causes and effects of racism in creating and prolonging homelessness.

Crisis has a strong understanding of the causes and impacts of homelessness, and the solutions that we know will end it. Crisis conducted this research to build our understanding of how racism affects homelessness.

- We wanted to expand knowledge on homelessness among minoritised ethnic groups.

- We wanted to better understand how racism leads to homelessness.

- We wanted to see how racism affects Crisis' members (people who use Crisis' services because they're experiencing homelessness) and people using other services.

This project was steered by a panel of Experts by Experience, facilitated by Power With. The group of Experts by Experience helped to shape the research in terms of design and narrative of the core research findings. In addition, 13 of the group acted as community researchers, helping to deliver the research by supporting the design of the research materials, identifying research participants, doing research interviews, and carrying out some analysis activities.

We interviewed 58 people of colour who have faced homelessness in Great Britain. The people interviewed included British citizens and non-UK nationals and the majority of participants in the research were living in England when the research was conducted[1]. The interviews were led by Crisis staff and community researchers.

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[1]Out of the 58 interviewees, 40 were living in England (24 in London, 10 in the Midlands, four in the North and two in the South), 11 in Scotland and seven in Wales when the research was conducted.

Existing evidence

People from Black and minoritised ethnic communities are more likely to experience homelessness across the UK than white households[2]. These patterns also vary depending on the local area and the type of homelessness, e.g. the trends are different for rough sleeping, living in temporary accommodation and living in overcrowded housing.

In England and Wales, people who identify as Black are significantly more likely to experience homelessness.

> **Between 2018-2023, 10-11%** of those seeking homelessness support from their local authority in England were Black[3]; despite Black people making up **4%** of England's population[4]. **20%** of temporary accommodation seekers in England had a lead applicant who identified as Black.

Meanwhile, in Scotland overall levels of homelessness vary less between Black and minoritised ethnic communities and white-led households, but the gap has been widening over recent years[5].

> In London, the majority **(54.5%)** of people sleeping rough in **2023/24** were non-UK nationals and nearly a quarter of people sleeping rough identified as Black[6].

This pattern of increased risk of homelessness among Black and minoritised ethnic communities also extends to housing insecurity and aspects of hidden homelessness. In England and Wales, households where all members identified as Black had the highest levels of living in overcrowded housing overall. However, in several regions the level of overcrowding was highest in households that identified as Asian or Asian British/Welsh. Pakistani and Bangladeshi households face greater risk of homelessness than Indian and other groups[7].

Despite these statistics, the government has generally neglected the topics of housing and homelessness when looking into racism[8]. There is 'limited evidence on how experiences of racism in the UK affect risks of homelessness, experiences of homelessness or interventions to reduce homelessness'[9].

A few recent publications show ways that racism and homelessness are related, by pointing to:

- **how direct acts of racism can lead to a person becoming homeless**
- **how experiences of racial discrimination are linked to a higher risk of homelessness**
- **how institutional racism makes it harder for people of colour who are homeless or in insecure housing to access a settled home.**

Homelessness, and its disproportionate impact on people from Black and minoritised ethnic communities, is devastating but solvable[10]. Through this research, we hope to highlight some of the ways that racism – including racism that is ingrained in how systems operate – can contribute towards homelessness, and make recommendations for how policymakers and services can address this.

[2]Bramley, G., Fitzpatrick, S., McIntyre, J. and Johnsen, S. (2022). Homelessness amongst Black and minoritised ethnic communities in the UK: A statistical report on the state of the nation. Herriot Watt University and I-SPHERE.
[3]Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2024). Tables on homelessness. Online:
[4]Office for National Statistics (2021), Ethnic group: England and Wales: Census 2021. Online:
[5]Bramley, G., Fitzpatrick, S., McIntyre, J. and Johnsen, S. (2022). Homelessness amongst Black and minoritised ethnic communities in the UK: A statistical report on the state of the nation. Herriot Watt University and I-SPHERE.
[6]CHAIN (2024), CHAIN Annual Report April 2023 – March 2024.

[7]Bramley, G., Fitzpatrick, S., McIntyre, J. and Johnsen, S. (2022). Homelessness amongst Black and minoritised ethnic communities in the UK: A statistical report on the state of the nation. Herriot Watt University and I-SPHERE.
[8]Brambley, G., Fitzpatrick, S., McIntyre, J. and Johnsen, S. (2022). Homelessness amongst Black and minoritised ethnic communities in the UK: A statistical report on the state of the nation. Herriot Watt University and I-SPHERE.
[9]Finney, N. (2022), Ethnic inequalities and homelessness in the UK. Centre for Homelessness Impact.
[10]See: Crisis (2018), The plan to end homelessness.

Key findings from the research

Crisis knows that life events like job loss, injury or illness, mental health issues, relationship break ups, death, or being a victim of crime puts people under considerable strain and can make it harder to cope with housing challenges.

These challenges could include rising rents, poverty and unemployment, eviction, being asked to leave home, being rejected for a rental property, or waiting in temporary accommodation for a stable home.

These situations individually are tough, but the pressure of them combined can for many people become a tipping point into homelessness, without the basic security that we all need to thrive.

> **"Just like a plastic bag. If you put [in] too much water or a balloon, with [too much] air, it's going to burst. The same with a human being."**

These pressures both lead to and are worsened by homelessness, as it is harder to navigate services, find, and keep a home.

This research shows that racism and discrimination contribute to homelessness. Racism puts pressure on people and makes other challenges worse. These challenges are then more likely to affect a person's housing situation.

Sometimes interviewees experienced direct and 'overt' racism. Sometimes racism was more subtle or disguised. In some instances, racism and other inequalities were built into institutions: interviewees experienced how the way some systems operate discriminates against minoritised ethnic communities. All these types of racism contributed to the homelessness our interviewees described.

Racism and discrimination affect people's relationships with society, institutions and services. This can make people feel like they can't go to services for help – the very services that are set up to help them. This can also impact people's sense of self and wellbeing, due to the physical or emotional attacks they experience.
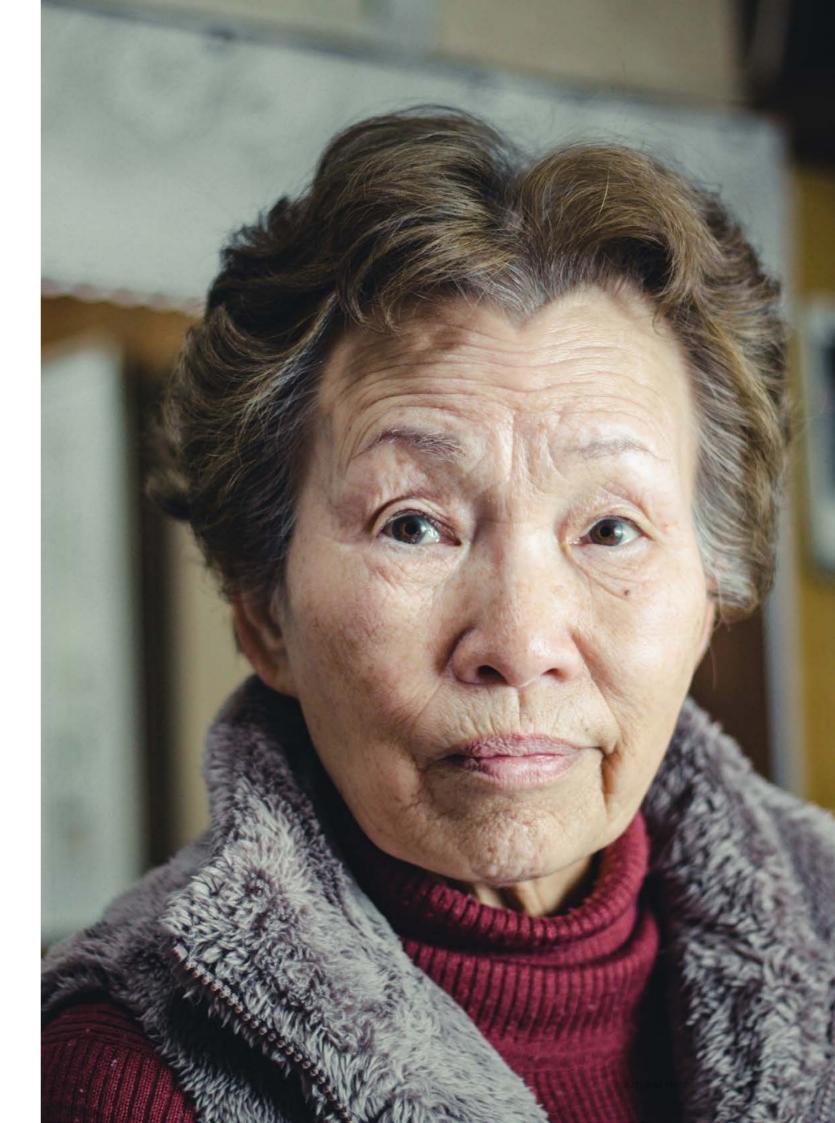
> Racism and discrimination can lead to people of colour:
>
> - **being discriminated against by landlords**
> - **being locked into poverty, because of long-standing and deeply ingrained inequality in the system**
> - **having negative experiences with the police and criminal justice system**
> - **receiving inadequate medical treatment for physical and mental health issues.**
>
> These can add to the 'pressures' that cause homelessness.
>
> People of colour use community, activism, family, faith, and education to help them navigate the challenges they face, but for some, the isolating effects of racism and homelessness have made these resources unreachable.
>
> These findings are described in the following sections.

'Messing with your mind': experiences of racism and discrimination among people of colour who have been homeless.

All research participants experienced racism or discrimination. This included verbal or physical attacks as well as more hidden forms of racism, and racism that was embedded in the way systems functioned. The report highlights how this racism and discrimination adds extra 'pressure' on the lives of people of colour and their housing situations.

Some interviewees had recently experienced overt forms of racism, such as verbal and physical abuse. This had contributed to trauma they were still living with. Racist encounters significantly affected people's lives, impacting their sense of safety and belonging.

The experiences included discrimination based on gender expression, sexuality, disability, and class. There was often a blurred line between racism and prejudice towards immigrants. This meant both UK and non-UK nationals were affected by discrimination around whether they 'belonged' in the UK – such as being told to 'go back home'.

Interviewees generally felt that racism was 'hidden'. They felt that it wasn't always obvious, yet led to worse treatment in areas like employment and healthcare. They were also aware of how past racism still affects people's lives today.

> "Sometimes when I fill out the form like the part that says what your background is, like or are you Black Caribbean and stuff like that – I tend not to fill it out because I feel fearful filling that out because I know what's going to come. And like 'Oh, we can't help you...'"

Racism affected people's day-to-day-lives. Many felt it caused psychological harm. It lowered confidence and self-esteem. It broke down trust in other people, and created a feeling of living with a 'dark cloud'. Some people were living with traumatic experiences relating to both homelessness and racism.

> "It's a risk, it's a gamble. It's like I'm paying some sort of roulette each time and just seeing, oh am I going to get my feelings hurt today by a white person. Or are they going to help me?"

People sometimes felt doubtful about getting help from public services, like those for homelessness and housing. Some felt that because of racism in institutions like the police, services may be harmful instead of helpful. Even when people tried to get help, the process was often very hard.

> "As a Black woman it's harder to get everything, full stop. It's harder to get support, it's harder to get help, it's harder to get advice. It's literally ten times harder to do anything. Because the minute you try to speak up for yourself and defend yourself, you are quickly labelled as aggressive, violent, scary, you name it. I am none of those things."

'"The colour of my skin is everything": how racism causes homelessness

Racism is not only a 'pressure' in itself, but it also makes other pressures worse. All of this contributes to making housing situations less secure. Different forms of racism (e.g. structural racism, overt racism) connect to the causes of homelessness, so people of colour face unique challenges.

Some interviewees had to leave their job or their home due to racist abuse, causing them to become homeless.

> "We were renting social housing but people in the local area would basically terrorise us for being Chinese racially, so we would have like a lot of harassment at the flat we were living in so we were kind of forced to move to a new areaand relocate, basically."

Interviewees also faced racism in wider structures and systems, which indirectly contributed to their homelessness.

> "One of the reasons that me and my mum fell into homelessness was my health... if the health people had been like really supportive then I wouldn't have ended up being on the streets and in hostels several times over with my mum... it was mainly medical services that let us down in a great way."

Structural racism also affected interviewees' reasons for becoming homeless and access to support to find a secure home. For some, the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' policy blocked access to benefits and housing support. This led to homelessness among non-UK nationals by denying them access to statutory homelessness services. Some interviewees also felt the impact of 'hostile environment' policies leaving them worse off.

> "They will take your case, they will leave your case for five years, you won't hear anything from them, and they won't write to you.... You cannot eat properly. You cannot buy clothes. You cannot buy anything... It is so difficult for you to live a proper life... this thing is affecting your health, physically and emotionally... No information. Nothing. Every day the same. For the whole five years, every day is the same. So this is the kind of thing that the Home Office do to destabilise life and by the time they will give you that paper... by the time you are 40, when you get your paper you are 50."

Some people faced discrimination from letting agents or landlords. They were assumed to be a non-UK national when trying to rent, regardless of whether the UK was their birthplace. This shows that the policy denying housing to people without permission to remain in the UK emboldens racial discrimination.

> "... You contact a letting agent or something and they will ask you – I don't have an English accent so that is one thing that stands out on its own. Then the fact that you have a child also becomes a problem for them. Having children becomes a problem. You have to present your documents – I don't have a British passport to give. Even as British, our ethnicity does stand against us in most cases."

'They see me as a threat': experiences of accessing homelessness support.

Several interviewees reported difficulties when trying to access housing support from local authorities. A lack of suitable and inclusive services for people of colour leads to longer homelessness, exposing them further to the negative impacts of being without a home.

Some interviewees had negative experiences with statutory homelessness services. This echoes other research[11]. However, people of colour sometimes felt they were being treated worse because of their ethnicity. They reported feeling ignored, and then being seen as aggressive when they tried to advocate for themselves.

> "...They see me as a threat, I have to be honest, each time I call them. They don't want to stay on the phone with me."

People facing homelessness with young children talked about feeling trapped, with some people living for many years in temporary accommodation and/or unsafe rented housing. They often felt that local authorities had no solution to their homelessness, and that they were having worse experiences because of their ethnic background.

> "A lot of the people that I've met are people of colour who have been put in this temporary situation, which is sad because if the council know that they have to rehouse you, rather than keep you in limbo and cause all this stress and trauma and instability, especially for the children. The adults okay, it's bad, but for the children that are our future, that is a sad part for me. I just think that is totally unfair on them. Nine times out of ten, it's children of colour or parents of colour. So that's what really sits with me, and it just makes me think and feel that something needs to be done. Because this is not right."

Participants spoke of subtle forms of discrimination when accessing homelessness support. There were cases in which women described being stuck in a cycle of unsuitable forms of housing and temporary accommodation.

> "They're sending you into properties they know is not suitable and then they probably know some people's breaking point and a lot of people will say I'm not moving in there, I'm not going in there. They say to them, oh you're intentionally homeless."

'[We are] all one family': what helped people to navigate racism and homelessness.

People of colour draw on community, activism, family, faith, and education to help them navigate challenges. But racism and homelessness can lead to isolation, putting these resources out of reach.

Interviewees described the benefits of getting support for mental health or wellbeing through psychological services, trusted friends, peers and support workers, or a faith-based community.

> For me, my spirituality, even attending church is always very important to me because I would say that that was the main thing that kept me together. That was the main thing that gave me the strength and the positivity through the process. I felt I was on a journey and nothing happens coincidentally and you cannot face the situation that you have no way out of.

Some interviewees felt it was important to stay optimistic, and had been able to rebuild their lives after moving into a settled home. Some were helping other people with challenges such as immigration and homelessness and felt this helped them to process their own experiences.

> "I like to try and help other [similar] people and in general I feel I like to help anyone that is suffering from mental health, so helping others helps me."

> "You get rejected actually by family, even by the community... there is such a taboo, you know. Such a shame. You bring shame to the community."

[11]See, for example: Sutton-Hamilton, C., Allard, M., Stroud, R. and Albanese, F. (2022), 'I hoped there'd be more options': Experiences of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2018-2021, Crisis.

However, many were living in isolated and difficult housing situations and so couldn't rely on resources like education and community. In some cases, these resources had harmed them and had led to their homelessness. It was therefore important for people, where possible, to build new support networks to help them navigate life's challenges.

Concluding remarks, recommendations and actions

Recommendations

The Experts by Experience group developed a set of actions for Crisis in response to the findings of this report. These can be found in Appendix 6.

These actions informed the following recommendations to accompany this report.

1. Our culture at Crisis

The research is an important evidence base, which we must build on by continuing to listen, learn and reflect on the experiences of people from minoritised ethic communities. Racism and discrimination have no place in our society and Crisis is committed to working against this. Everyone should have a safe place to call home, and we are determined to be there for everyone who needs our support.

Alongside this research, Crisis is working to meaningfully embed equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in our work and our organisational culture and practices. Our 10 year strategy sets out a bold vision for the beginning of the end of homelessness which is about thinking bigger and developing solutions to overcome the barriers to progress. Our work must be grounded in fairness and equity. We're on a journey to meet this vision and after a full external review of our policies, workplace culture and ways of working we have committed to:

- **A learning and development programme so that all managers at Crisis have the knowledge and understanding to equitably and consistently apply our policies and practices and address equality, diversity and inclusion issues in the workplace including bullying, harassment and micro-aggressions**

- **Be more transparent with decision-making, understanding and application of Crisis' policies such as our pay and renumeration policy**

- **Develop targeted programmes to support under-represented groups to succeed in the workplace and grow the potential of our existing colleagues, including development programmes to support staff with lived experience of homelessness and colleagues who are from minoritised ethic communities to ensure they can learn, grow and ultimately succeed at Crisis.**

2. Our services at Crisis

Our network of Skylights provide support up and down the country – from finding a home, to applying for jobs, learning vital skills, and accessing healthcare and support. We want to provide people the best services possible. The research has identified a lack of suitable and inclusive services for people from minoritised ethnic communities and highlighted experiences of discrimination when seeking help. In the next 12 months we will:

- **Improve data collection on protected characteristics - including ethnicity - to better understand who is using our services and groups who are under-represented in the areas we work in**

- **Explore how to reach those under-represented groups who may benefit the most from our service offer**

- **Commit to reviewing our whole service offer to particular marginalised groups, using insight and external resources to improve access and outcomes.**

3. Policy solutions

With the right polices in place we can end homelessness. But these must work for everyone and there are historical and structural barriers stopping people getting equal access to housing and support. The research has evidenced experiences of overt and implicit racism and discrimination, which continues because of institutional racism and racially focused policies.

To address the disproportionate impact of homelessness on people of colour in England, the UK Government:

- **Should use the forthcoming cross-departmental homelessness strategy to look at the disproportionate impact of homelessness on people of colour and the intersectionality with other forms of discrimination. The cross- government strategy and inter-ministerial group on addressing all forms of homelessness should look at ways to mitigate this impact, including through improving the experience of housing options and access to and experience of social housing. The strategy should ensure that all public services people are likely to interact with when facing homelessness are involved in homelessness prevention activity as effectively as possible, including better integration between mental health and housing, which was identified as a particular issue for people of colour in this research.**

- **Should tackle discrimination in the private rental sector in England through the Renters' Rights Bill by ending Right to Rent, a policy which the High Court ruled in 2019 was causing racial discrimination.**

To address the disproportionate impact of homelessness on people migrating to the UK, the UK Government must make sure that everyone can access help and support to prevent or resolve their homelessness, regardless of where they are from.

As a minimum the UK government:

- **Must ensure that Home Office policies, including No Recourse to Public Funds, do not contribute to homelessness across the UK nations. Policies relating to newly recognised refugees must be improved to reduce the risk of people becoming homeless when leaving asylum accommodation. This includes:**
  - Extending the eviction notice for asylum accommodation to at least 56 days give people more time to find an alternative place to stay and services more time to help prevent homelessness.
  - Requiring Home Office accommodation providers to make referrals to local authority housing services when someone is given notice to leave their asylum accommodation.
  - Granting people in the asylum process the right to work after six months.

- **Should ensure that wider immigration policy does not push people into homelessness, including allowing those who have arrived since the introduction of the Illegal Migration Act 2023 to enter the asylum system and have their claims processed accordingly, and repealing the Illegal Migration Act 2023.**

While the majority of this research was conducted in England, we hope that the broad themes and learnings within this report may also provide helpful insights as other parts of the UK develop policies to address the disproportionate impact of homelessness on people of colour. For example, the actions relating to homelessness within the Welsh Government's Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan.

Glossary of terms

Community researchers / Experts by Experience

People with personal experience of the research topic. For this research, the 17 people on the panel were from Black, Asian or other minoritised ethnic groups, and either had lived experience of homelessness, or experience of supporting people of colour through homelessness. The Experts by Experience helped direct the research approach; the community researchers also worked on several parts of the research such as writing interview questions, recruiting research participants, interviewing people, and reflecting on the findings.

Hostile environment

A series of policies introduced in 2012 designed to make it as difficult as possible for immigrants to access housing, healthcare and work when they don't have permission to remain in the UK.

Institutional racism / structural racism

When institutions (for example, the police and the NHS) act in ways that unfairly treat people of certain ethnicities by virtue of how they work, leading to worse outcomes and experiences.

No Recourse to Public Funds

A policy that bars some UK immigrants from receiving government benefits or housing assistance, depending on their current immigration status.

Overt racism

Behaviour that is a very explicitly racist or that clearly comes out of racist attitudes.

People of colour

People who identify as being from Black, Asian or other ethnic minorities in the UK. This term was chosen based on conversations with a panel of people who had lived experience of racism and homelessness and/or supporting others with homelessness – however, it is recognised that any term used to describe people from a range of minoritised communities is fundamentally problematic and risks 'lumping together' a range of different experiences. In this report, 'people of colour' and 'people from minoritised ethnic groups' mean the same thing.

Minoritised ethnic groups

This term refers to people who identify their ethnic background as Black, Asian or other non-white ethnic group. This term was chosen based on conversations with a panel of people who had lived experience of racism and/or supporting others with homelessness – however, it is recognised that any term used to describe people from a range of minoritised communities is fundamentally problematic and risks 'lumping together' a range of different experiences. In this report, 'people of colour' and 'people from minoritised ethnic groups' mean the same thing.

Statutory

If something is statutory, it's 'official', or to do with government or the law. In this report, 'statutory' is usually used to talk about services provided by the national or local government. For example, statutory homelessness services are services provided by the local authority to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, in line with their obligations.