

Marisa Zapata:

Hi, y'all. I'm Marisa Zapata. And this is the podcast where we examine homelessness by talking to researchers and experts, who of course include people with lived experience of homelessness to understand what we're missing in the headlines and soundbites.

Marisa Zapata:

In each episode, we will help clear up misconceptions about homelessness and to answer what it would take to prevent and end homelessness in Portland and beyond. Who am I? I'm an associate professor of land-use planning at Portland State University and director of PSU's Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative, a research center dedicated to reducing and preventing homelessness, where we lift up the experiences and perspectives of people of color.

Intro:

In this episode, we talk to Dr. Norweeta Milburn and Earl Edwards, researchers from UCLA, talking about key findings from their recent study, inequity in the Permanent Supportive Housing system in Los Angeles, scale scope and reasons for black residents return into homelessness, the higher rates of homelessness and inequitable outcomes, mirrors trends across the country.

Marisa Zapata:

Hello everyone. Thank you for joining us. Today, I am joined by two scholars. Norweeta Milburn is a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. And Earl Edwards is a doctoral candidate at the same university. I'm going to let them introduce themselves further and how they got to this point in their work.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

I'm Nowreeta Milburn. I am a community psychologist by training. And I would say that most of my research career has focused on people with lived experience of homelessness. I started this work in the east coast in Washington, D.C, and continued the work in New York.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

And when I moved to California, my primary interest is really thinking about prevention and help people exit first, not fall into homelessness, but then exit from homelessness. And the group that I focus on most often are young people with lived experience of homelessness. I also have a really strong commitment to understanding homelessness among people of color, primarily African Americans.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

And I came to this work many years ago because of a concern for really understanding what led to homelessness and then also understanding the strengths and resilience that people have with lived experience and how we can build on that strength and resilience to help people exit homelessness and maintain housing stability.

Marisa Zapata:

Great, thank you. Earl.

Earl Edwards:

Yeah. So as you mentioned, I'm a doctoral candidate in the school of education information studies. My advisor asking me to do a research proposal for students experiencing homelessness in LA county. And I'm a former classroom teacher. I have my administration license to be a principal. And so I started to do that and I realized that there was a policy that I never heard about which was McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

Earl Edwards:

And so I just really got interested in looking more deeply into student homelessness. And when I started to do resource on student homelessness one thing I started to notice was there was a lot of black students who were experiencing homelessness at disproportionate numbers.

Earl Edwards:

And so in order to kind of answer that question and better understand that question, I really started looking to structural racism as a lens to be able to kind of better understand the situation. And in addition to looking at students in particular, I also been doing a lot of work in the LA county area. So I was one of the facilitators for their ad hoc reporter on black people experiencing homelessness.

Earl Edwards:

So I let all their listening sessions throughout the county. I've been doing work with the county around homelessness, more broadly. So that's kind of how I got into the work and I'm trying to gather as much information as I can from Nowreeta.

Marisa Zapata:

So when you say the county, you're meaning Los Angeles County?

Earl Edwards:

Yes, Los Angeles County.

Marisa Zapata:

And who is in charge of homelessness there?

Earl Edwards:

It's a collaborative. So I've done work with the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority, LAHSA, as well as the homeless initiative, which is led by the county of Los Angeles. In addition to different cities, having different individuals that are also working within that space, their continuum care is very, very wide.

Earl Edwards:

And I've had the opportunity to kind of work alongside all of them in the different regions of Los Angeles County.

Marisa Zapata:

And for listeners, a continuum of care, just to remind everyone is how the federal government channels money to regions to address homelessness with the idea that we should be able to coordinate care,

reduce duplications, and be more efficient. For those of y'all who are in Portland, the continuum of care for the city of Portland is with Multnomah County.

Marisa Zapata:

And then the rest of the Tri-County area has its own individual continuum. So if you feel homelessness is a confusing space to work in, you just heard a lot of these acronyms for us and for LA county, and there's even more for LA county. But really drew my interest and what I thought would be great for our listeners to hear about was this report that you had done for the Los Angeles homelessness service agency also referred to as LAHSA.

Marisa Zapata:

Specifically looking at the experiences of black people who are in the homelessness management system coming into homelessness, but then also trying to exit to permanent housing. I'm wondering if you could tell us a little about that report.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

The work that we did really grew out of the ad hoc committee on black people with the experience of homelessness in Los Angeles County. I was brought in by the California Policy Lab to begin to help provide some of the research that the committee needed in order to do its work. So this study, it's a small, what we call a mixed method study.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

That means we gather kind of qualitative data interviews as well as quantitative data. And the quantitative data came out of Homelessness Management Information System. And what we did, we really focused on understanding what led to black people with lived experience of homelessness disproportionately falling out of Permanent Supportive Housing.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

One of the things that we found was that about one in four black people, and we're focusing on single adult residents, one in four left placements in a Permanent Supportive Housing. And over kind of a 10 year period between 2010 and 2019, we also found that about 39% of black Permanent Supportive Housing residents compared to white Permanent Supportive Housing residents were more likely to return to homelessness.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

And when we do all of the things that we do as researchers to account for all of the factors, variables that might be contributing to this type of finding, we still found that black residents were still more than 19% more likely than white residents to return to homelessness. So huge problem. LA county has a population that's maybe 6% black and about 42% of the homeless population are black.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

So there's a huge health disparity inequity that we see, but I'm going to let Earl talk about the qualitative findings because he really led this effort.

Earl Edwards:

So we started before COVID hit and so we had to kind of adjust with it, but we were able to talk to 14 project managers of permanent supportive warehousing. 11 case managers that were actually working either directly as case managers in permanent supportive warehousing, or were helping with the housing navigation process and also eight black residents.

Earl Edwards:

We particularly focused on the black residents either current or previous Permanent Supportive Housing residents and centered our report kind of around their experiences and then kind of supplemented information with the other different populations to really center that voice.

Earl Edwards:

Because oftentimes we don't have a lot of research that really centers on the live experience of black people and then utilizing other types of data to kind of reinforce and also make sense of those experiences.

Marisa Zapata:

So before we get into more of the findings, I was wondering if y'all could talk a little bit about this pretty dramatic disparity that you're seeing in Los Angeles. I think we see it in probably every continuum in the country to some degree or another. We certainly see it here in Portland and of course, nationally. What are your thoughts about what is driving that disparity rate?

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

I mean, when we really talk about systemic racism in the United States, that I think is really underscoring some of that disparity. But I mean, homelessness is really a housing issue. It is housing and a lack of housing. And when we look at the kind of broader context I think for black people living in the US, we have historically been lived in communities that have been redlined.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

So we've not had access to housing. It has been challenging to maintain housing inter-generationally. We are in communities that have been impacted by things like gentrification. We've lost housing stock in many communities, especially working class communities and poor communities. And it's just a complex issue.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

We've seen a loss of jobs at employment and reduced salaries in fields and areas where we were more likely to see black people working. So it's complex, but this housing piece I think is the most central piece. And it's really the loss of housing stock across communities and disproportionately in communities of color, and especially black communities.

Earl Edwards:

Yeah, and to add on to that. So yeah, I think it's one, it's about housing, right? We need more housing period, but then also looking at it and thinking about structural racism is helpful because I'm coming from an education perspective, right? From schools.

Earl Edwards:

And I got interested in this as a result of kids experiencing homelessness and going to schools and also the outcomes that are connected with graduating high school and opportunities later on in life. A lot of the things that nobody has talked about, wealth accumulation, right? Who has access to wealth accumulation? Who has access to high income jobs? Those things are connected in our society to owning home housing.

Earl Edwards:

And then also thinking about the institutions that also increases the likelihood of you not being able to have those things. So redlining, you think about the racial covenants that we had back in the early 1900s. We think about the white flight that happened in the 1950s in a lot of our urban cities.

Earl Edwards:

So you combine that with the devaluing and the lack of wealth that black people in black communities have, and then you couple that with other institutions contributing to that. So the increase of arresting people, right? And the mass incarceration movement that happened in the 80s, the increased number of individuals going into foster care, right?

Earl Edwards:

So in the 1970s and 80s, there was a huge influx of black children being taken away from their families. And we know that aging out of the foster care system is also another really high indicator of falling into homelessness.

Earl Edwards:

So that's why it's really important to think about it from a structural perspective and also how the institutions are overlapping with each other, because they all contributing to black people not having the resources to get into that limited amount of housing stock that we have now.

Earl Edwards:

And another big part of it is when we have more housing stock, how we make sure that black people are now having the opportunity to go into quality housing. Because we often see throughout history is that when the housing stock does get better, we still have some discrimination that happens in terms of where and what opportunities that black people have to earn and live. And that came out a little bit in our actual report.

Marisa Zapata:

Report definitely highlights that. And one of the challenges I've found is that yes, obviously housing is the solution to homelessness. It's a lack of affordable and accessible housing that creates the circumstances for homelessness. There are two struggles that I have with that framing.

Marisa Zapata:

One is which just because people can afford housing in lower rent areas does not mean it's housing we would want people to live in. And so how do we make sure we're also lifting up that housing quality, landlord relationships are also essential? But then how do we also talk about the realities and the complexities of racism in particular and keep that lifted up while pushing the housing narrative?

Marisa Zapata:

I get very worried that we're going to end up in this housing stock narrative and places like Los Angeles and Portland that have passed big revenue measures are going to say, look, we built the housing and there's still lots of black people, there's still lots of Latinos who are still homeless. Why isn't this fixed?

Marisa Zapata:

I don't know if you've thought about that at all or that framing or how to enter it. It's just one of the things that gives me heartburn at night because I want to be like yes, housing is a solution, but also we have to do some other things too, particularly for people of color.

Earl Edwards:

Yeah, and I think it's the and, right? And I think it's always important that we include that and into the conversation. It's the same thing with Permanent Supportive Housing, right? It's the model is important and it works.

Earl Edwards:

However, there are, because of our institutions and disparities that happen as a result of our interactions, of the different interactions and layering of our institutions and also implicit bias that happens within those institutions, discrepancies are always going to be there if we're not looking, if we don't have measurements to be able to gauge it.

Earl Edwards:

So it's really important that we need more housing stock and that needs to be a priority. And that's something I think a lot of people can kind of get behind. And in addition to that, we need to also be having conversations on how do we ensure that we create this housing and also have equitable ways in which people are being housed?

Earl Edwards:

How do we make sure that the previous housing stock that we have we're doing the renovations necessary to make sure that they're actually quality living spaces for anyone who lives there as well? And so I think those conversations have to be connected and they can't be too far apart from each other because when they become too far, apart from each other, that's when the pathologizing happens, right?

Earl Edwards:

Now it becomes a well, we have the housing, but these people are still not moving in. So it must be something wrong with them because we have it. They're just not taking advantage of it. And so those conversations have to be connected, but housing stock and those universal type of initiatives must be a part of the solution.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

So I'm going to build on the housing stock is important and the pieces of it that are equally important are quality, affordability and accessibility. If you're looking to rent an apartment or rent space, a landlord is going to look to see whether you have first and last month's rent.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

And I've recently discovered in LA, potentially you have an income that covers three times the rent. We don't ask those questions when we're looking for housing for people with lived experience of homelessness. Maybe we do. I'm not seeing what we ask them, but that's the basic reality. So when we're thinking about housing, it's the type of housing that is being built.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

And is it housing that really meets that quality, affordability and accessibility piece? The other is that and piece that Earl was speaking to. And when we think about race and racism, our lens is often on fixing people of color and making them better in multiple ways. What can we do to make people of color better? So if racism will go away. Racism is structural.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

And one of the things that we did in our report was really not thinking about how do we fix black people with lived experience, but how do we fix the service sector to begin to address this structural piece? So really understanding bias in the service sector, understanding what we're hearing from providers about what it is like to place black people in Permanent Supportive Housing.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

Some of the decisions that they make in terms of it's easier to match black people to communities that are predominantly black, even though black people are saying, I don't feel safe there. I may be black, that's not my community of origin.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

I didn't come from that community. So our lens was really just kind of understanding that process and thinking about how we can fix the process versus black residents.

Marisa Zapata:

That's great. And this specific point about what some of the residents were saying about what neighborhoods they wanted to be in or not is something I want to get into a little bit more deeply. One of the things I was wondering is that if you wanted listeners to take away three things from the report to make sure that they really... Your favorite points from the report, what would they be?

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

So two of my favorite points, one point is that we think of Permanent Supportive Housing as the solution. Once people are placed in Permanent Supportive Housing, they are housed. And it was very interesting to hear from our black residents that they saw Permanent Supportive Housing as a stepping stone.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

They don't want to be in permanent housing for the rest of their lives. They want to go into Permanent Supportive Housing and have that lead to potentially Section 8 housing, for example. That's what some saw as more permanent housing. And then the other takeaway is our service providers are working really very hard and they are trying to meet numbers in terms of placement.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

And sometimes it's easier to match people with, to match black people with black communities or black people with black landlords. So some of the bias that we see is really because they are trying to meet the demands of this system, and it's not that they are themselves prejudice or racist. And that's an important point.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

And the kind of the 2.5 of that is both the providers and black residents talked about the importance of really treating case management, truly treating it as a professional career and providing opportunities for promotion, but also competitive salaries across programs for case managers. Because the retention piece was very important.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

Both residents and case managers said when you have the high turnover that does create challenges for black residents. So those kind of two and a half key takeaways for me.

Earl Edwards:

She went first. She stole my points.

Marisa Zapata:

[crosstalk 00:20:15]

Earl Edwards:

So I would add on to that. So I was able to do the interviews. And one thing that really stuck out to me was the hope and optimism that the residents that I talked to had about their lives and about the future. So the stepping stone thing was really important because they saw it as an opportunity for them to stabilize and then for them to thrive.

Earl Edwards:

And so when I was having a conversation with them, a 55 year old man was talking about, he wants to get married. He's like, "I haven't gave it up yet. I'm going to get myself a wife." And he wants to be able to provide for his family. And so he was actually looking into trying to become an accountant and he was doing research and actually studying to become an accountant because he saw that for himself.

Earl Edwards:

Another individuals was talking about changing careers, how she was literally... One of the things she wanted her case managers to do was to help her on her actual resume so she actually could apply and actually change careers. Another woman was a grandmother and she was living in an SRO with no kitchen.

Earl Edwards:

And one of the things that was causing her a lot of stress was she grew up in a family where the matriarch was a person that everyone came to the house and they cooked and they had dinner at the dinner table. And that's something that she just doesn't have in the space she has right now. And even

though she was very appreciative of the space and the opportunity to really stabilize and get off the streets, she wanted a kitchen.

Earl Edwards:

She wanted a table where she can bring her family together and for them to actually have dinner together. And so a big part of thinking what we need to do as researchers, and also when policy makers are thinking about this, is we need to humanize the individuals that we're talking about. We need to recognize that there are part of families and they're not just unattached people.

Earl Edwards:

They may be unattached when you find them, but if you talk to them, they'll tell you, yeah, I have family over here. I'm waiting to get myself together so I can reunite with my family members. One case manager was talking about how one of her clients was evicted or actually willingly left after being threatened with eviction, because he would have his son come over to stay over.

Earl Edwards:

And as a result of him having his son come over, that was a violation of his, he would stay there too long, and that was a violation of his actual lease. And he was like, "Well, if my kid can't stay here, then I don't want to be here." And after being badgered, he ended up just leaving on his own. But these are the parts of the stories that we don't talk about enough.

Earl Edwards:

We don't humanize the individuals enough. And this is what kind of leads into that pathologizing piece, right? Because we think we know what they want without asking them and having a better understanding of what their actual needs are and how we can do our best to really make sure we're supporting them in a systematic way.

Marisa Zapata:

There's some things I want to back up on, but I want to stay with this particular thread because it stuck out to me around this question of I think it gets framed as building security, right? Who gets to enter lease violations on who was staying in the building?

Marisa Zapata:

And we have definitely found that in our studies here in Portland as well in a couple of different ways. At the same time, your report also indicates that some people weren't feeling secure enough in buildings. And so it's this kind of tension between how much autonomy can the buildings actually give residents?

Marisa Zapata:

And I noticed that is a very paternalistic perspective, but that is what they maintain is their legal obligation, versus how do we help people feel and be safe while giving people the ability to have more autonomy in terms of who was staying and who was going? Did residents have an idea of what that could look like?

Earl Edwards:

Yeah. So I think a lot of times when individuals talked about security, they didn't see it in the same form that we typically talk about security, right? So they didn't say, oh, we know we need more cops and security guards kind of monitoring the space. They just needed more people there to help navigate some of the different situations, right?

Earl Edwards:

And so when I think about it from a family perspective or a community perspective, if I live in a community that is safe, I know my neighbors, my neighbors know me. We can navigate situations in a collaborative way and we can help self regulate, right? The different situations.

Earl Edwards:

And so when they were talking about kind of having more support is having someone at the front door to welcome in people to say, hi, how's everyone doing, right? If you have someone at the front door just being friendly, inviting and asking them and saying hi to people coming in and knowing who lives there, that individual can now play a role in buffering individuals that don't necessarily belong there or are loitering.

Earl Edwards:

So having more people that in the space could actually mitigate a lot of the issues that individuals were talking about. And so it does... Or even having someone who is an actual case manager that is trained on helping to alleviate those actual issues in conflict management. Having some more people like that on staff and on site could alleviate it.

Earl Edwards:

So when they say security in a lot of ways is not to just a security guard or someone that's playing the role of a police officer. It's more of the individuals that can help mediate situations and help build those kind of community respects and also collaboration within those spaces.

Marisa Zapata:

Thank you. All right, so now to the big question that in many ways we probably should have done first, but we'll just do it now, is what on earth is Permanent Supportive Housing? Because even just the way that y'all explained it is different than how we talk about it in Portland and how I think about it.

Marisa Zapata:

And as an urban planner, I use totally different words than the homelessness services providers use. So give me the wisdom, tell me what this thing is.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

I will say, who knows in LA County? And one of our recommendations was for LA, for LAHSA to think about just documenting what is Permanent Supportive Housing, how they define it. Because we discovered there's so many different types of housing that falls in to this broad term.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

And then when you're trying to understand what type of housing works best for what people or what type of housing leads to people falling out of being stably housed? It's hard to determine.

Earl Edwards:

Yeah, in our interviews, just talking to participants and case managers, we were able to create a typology of about one, two, three is a matrix of three to seven matrix, right? So it depended on terms of housing configuration, if you had a kitchen or not, if you had a kitchen and a bathroom, you had two bedroom apartments, you had studios, you had cluster departments, you had tenant based housing?

Marisa Zapata:

What does cluster mean? What does cluster department mean? That'll be very specific as we get into this part. Bedrooms, I get, bathrooms and so forth, but clustering and congregate and project based.

Earl Edwards:

Yeah, exactly. So having-

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

Yes.

Marisa Zapata:

We're into some buzzy terms there.

Earl Edwards:

Yeah. So it's like a studio, but it has a common space. So you don't have your own bathroom, you'll have your own your own kitchen, right? So you have your own space, but then you'll have these common areas that you have to do-

Marisa Zapata:

So like a dorm?

Earl Edwards:

More like a dorm, yeah.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

Exactly, almost like a college dorm.

Earl Edwards:

Exactly.

Marisa Zapata:

You wouldn't call that an SRO.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

No.

Marisa Zapata:

A single room occupancy building.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

No.

Marisa Zapata:

Okay.

Earl Edwards:

So yeah, it becomes that. And then also who owns it, right? So is it being managed by an actual service provider? Is it being managed by independent private manager? Is it a joint relationship? And then also funding sources, right? So even you might have a one building, but the beds in that building might be allocated for different sources. So some might be connected to veteran funding.

Earl Edwards:

So that room is for veterans. Some other might be for the mental health agency in your space. So there's just so much diversity across what we have in terms of Permanent Supportive Housing, that it becomes really impossible to really do quality research on them because it's so much variation.

Earl Edwards:

And so creating a typology so we have a better understanding of what these certain housing stocks are will allow for more rigorous research on which ones are most effective for which populations and for what duration.

Marisa Zapata:

So when residents were talking about seeing Permanent Supportive Housing as a stopping point, what was it that do you think distinguished PSH from Section 8 housing for them?

Earl Edwards:

It's complex because there are so many different types of vouchers, right? So you have city vouchers, LA County, you have the county vouchers, and then you also have the federal vouchers. And then you also have a voucher that's connected to Permanent Supportive Housing, right? That's connected to services.

Earl Edwards:

One thing that came up a lot was individuals wanting to exit from the Permanent Supportive Housing voucher program, because one, it is restrictive in terms of where they can live. And then two, it also has additional case managers that they felt weren't actually being helpful. So it was another level of accountability.

Earl Edwards:

And then in addition to that, there is a stigma around mental health, right? So a lot of individuals wanted to get that stigma of having to go in and they're being connected to a mental health issue away. So that's one of the reasons why some individuals wanted to switch their vouchers.

Earl Edwards:

Another big reason is they wanted a voucher that gave them more flexibility to move different places. So for example, they might say, well, the amount of money that I'm able to use with my voucher limits, where I can live in LA, and it limits me to a housing stock in a community that I don't want to live in.

Earl Edwards:

But if I was able to go to San Bernardino, if I were able to go somewhere else, then I could actually live there with the voucher and have a better quality of living. And so they wanted a voucher that would allow them to have more flexibility in terms of where they can live.

Earl Edwards:

So they can use that voucher to live somewhere more affordable, maybe closer to other types of other family members that they had connections to. So those are some of the reasons why people wanted to switch those vouchers and wanted one, in order to get more independence and not have the stigma around the mental health component to it. And then two, have more flexibility in terms of where they actually can live.

Marisa Zapata:

What of these... I mean, were any of these building places where services were required or was it just the case workers really weren't supporting people in a way that they wanted to be supported?

Earl Edwards:

Everyone that we talked, to the agencies we were using in the housing first model, no one was required to do anything other than having some check-ins with their case managers, but they had access to the different services. And the quality of those services really depended on the capacity of the agencies they worked with.

Marisa Zapata:

So you brought up the other big term housing first. Would either one of you like to define housing first?

Earl Edwards:

Well, I'm going to give that to Nowreeta. She's the OG on that one.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

My understanding of the housing first model is really to provide housing for an individual with lived experience of homelessness and worry about any other issues once they're placed in housing. So if a person has mental health issues, person has substance abuse issues, those will be addressed once they're placed in housing. And when attempt will be made to link them to services, the services are not required.

Marisa Zapata:

This is then more broadly explained as Permanent Supportive Housing where people are told that they have a house permanently or a place to live permanently with supportive services, if they would like them. Nowreeta is disagreeing with me by the look on her face.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

I know. I'm just not sure. And this is where I put my researcher hat on. Full disclosure, housing first is not an area that I've done a deep dive in as a researcher, but I think really understanding you have housing first conceptually, what it is supposed to look like but how does that get operationalized on the ground?

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

And really understanding what's going on in these different settings that follow this model. I'm sure someone's done the research maybe, but it's kind of what we think of is a good idea. How it gets carried out it's not always the same.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah, it's this whole fidelity to the model concept.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

Absolutely.

Marisa Zapata:

In our continuum conversations it's been, well, can we say capital H capital F or is it lower case H? And I'm like, but what is the difference? How is this being operationalized? And then similarly talking to all of the different programs, not all Permanent Supportive Housing housing first, but even if we aren't all doing housing first, what are the differences that matter?

Marisa Zapata:

So, yeah, I mean, probably the easier way to say it is there's a housing unit made available and supportive services made available, and that may be the broadest definition that we can kind of agree on.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

Yes, I would agree.

Marisa Zapata:

I'm thrilled to see y'all really trying to think this through. Earl, you want to jump in?

Earl Edwards:

Yeah, I was going to say and also just contrasting it to previously how things were being done, right? So before it was before you even have an opportunity to get a housing, you needed to have your sobriety, you needed to have a certain amount of money saved up. You needed to have all these different things that we subscribe as being essential for you before you even get to housing.

Earl Edwards:

And so the idea of the housing first model came from no, we're not going to wait till those things are actually established. We're going to house you and then help you get those things established. So conceptually, that's the idea of it, but in terms of how it's implemented, it varies so much. It requires it to be flexible because the housing stocks are very, very different.

Earl Edwards:

The needs of everyone that's going into it is very, very different. And also I think a really important part to it too is we have individuals who are falling into homelessness as a result of economic reasons, as a result of racial discrimination that don't have severe mental health issues going in and get some types of mental health issues as a result of the experience of being homeless that are going into Permanent Supportive Housing as well.

Earl Edwards:

And there hasn't been a lot of conversation on how are we helping support that population? Because that is a population that's... We have so many individuals in LA county that fell into homelessness for the first time, right? And housing first, Permanent Supportive Housing is one of the best in very few one of the best options for them in order for them to get housed.

Earl Edwards:

Because rapid rehousing, how we use it now is just not enough support for a lot of individuals. And so we don't have enough options for individuals to even utilize, which is making it even harder for Permanent Supportive Housing type of approaches to work because we have a lot of individuals that probably could have light touches, but we don't have any programs that allow them to be able to get the housing they need with the light touch.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

And historically, because I've been doing this work for a while, historically black people were least likely to have the mental health issues and the substance abuse issues. And it was much more tied to the economic piece and some of the discrimination piece as well.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

We know that, but we still don't fully address that in our work. We try, but it's still not fully addressed. So a housing first kind of speaks to that, but it's a challenge.

Marisa Zapata:

I agree. And we see the same conversation here in Portland and we have some additional layers of complexity. I mean, I think this is also still similar in LA, whereas you don't have a huge population of people who are white and then several smaller groups of people of color because your Latino population, your non-black Latino population is so large in Los Angeles.

Marisa Zapata:

We even just have the data issue of being able to show experiences in HMIS for our different communities of color. We only have a little bit of time left and I want to be able to talk about this spatial component a little bit more. As an urban planner, this is a hot topic, right? We've had moving to opportunity, investing in neighborhoods.

Marisa Zapata:

Which do we do? How do we ask people their preferences? Where should we build the affordable housing or obtain the buildings or protect the buildings? It's actually really complicated. And so I wondered if you could expand more on what you were seeing in terms of this, people being bounded by

neighborhoods that they weren't from or necessarily wanting to be in because they were black versus neighborhoods that they would want to be in.

Marisa Zapata:

And then how does this rub up against policy when trying to actually develop affordable housing?

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

I mean, that's a huge question.

Marisa Zapata:

The most important question in my work.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

I know, and I'm trying to think about our data and really kind of extrapolating a bit from it. Part of the issue when we heard from black residents about not wanting to be in what were predominantly black neighborhoods and communities, it's really around resources and services and what's there.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

And what we're really talking about, we are talking about communities that are resource poor versus communities that are resource rich. And black residents, and this kind of gets back to what Earl always talking about, they are human beings with agency and awareness. And they know this community, if I go to this and people talk.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

We act like homeless people are in a vacuum that are not people, but they're just like you and I. And they're talking, they're sharing information, and they know if I get placed here, I'm going to have access to these resources. If I get placed somewhere else, I'm not going to have access to those types of resources.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

So in some of these conversations, if we could move kind of beyond black versus white, we really think about kind of resource rich versus resource poor. And what are the amenities in those resource rich communities? Parks, grocery stores, different types of housing, access to public transportation.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

I mean, there are lots of things that are resources that make them better communities to live in. People with lived experience of homelessness are aware of that. And that if we just extrapolate a bit from our data and what people have said, that's also what they're saying. I want to live in a good community that's going to help me stay housed, get employed and to be able to live my life.

Earl Edwards:

Yeah, and just to add onto that one of the things where the individual we talked about was do I live in an area where my kids can come visit me, right? And they're going to feel safe. When I think about it from a family perspective, schools, right?

Earl Edwards:

My dissertation on students who were experiencing homelessness and were able to successfully graduate high school. And one thing that came up was the advocacy that parents had in terms of making sure they were identified as a living in a certain community when they were homeless in order to make sure their kid had an opportunity to go to a better school.

Earl Edwards:

And so these are all conversations and these are all things that everyone thinks about, including those who are being displaced. There's certain situations where someone's from a community and they want to stay in that community. There's also certain situations where we're not talking about... I think one misnomer is that we're saying that, oh, South Los Angeles was the area that no one wanted to live in.

Earl Edwards:

No, it was the lowest quality housing stock in South LA that black people were being placed into and these areas were areas that were the hyper crime areas, high levels of prostitution. These were areas, these are blocks that they were like I don't want to live on that block because I understand that block is not a good place to live to live at and that's not a long-term option.

Earl Edwards:

So it wasn't just a whole area. It was very, very narrow communities that they recognized as, within the community recognized as not being safe places. And so it was really important to kind of connect that and policy decisions need to look at it from a holistic perspective in terms of not just the housing, but what are the other infrastructure we're putting in place that allows an individual to thrive?

Earl Edwards:

And that can't be disconnected from this conversation we're having in terms of housing placement. And so I think that's a really important piece of it, is the housing needs... We need the housing, but we also need to be considerate of what's around that housing to really act as buffers and opportunities for the people who live there?

Marisa Zapata:

I think this last point that you're getting at is so important to emphasize why we need to talk to people about their preferences and desires and fears, because people might use a shorthand and say I live in North Portland, I don't want to move to North Portland.

Marisa Zapata:

But what they're really saying is I don't want to live in that housing that I know exists on the 82nd block of whatever because I know what that means. Whereas maybe if it's another unit a few blocks away, it changes the conversation. But also just that importance of choice, right?

Marisa Zapata:

People being able to have those choices on whether they want to live in a neighborhood that has had historically less investment or a neighborhood that has had historically more investment. I mean, we all spent years making those delightful opportunity maps. We certainly know where the investment rich areas are, opportunity rich areas are.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

Marisa, you've hit on a really important point from our study. And that's really our focus was on giving people with lived experience a sense of agency and really centering the work in the voices of people with lived experience as Earl pointed out.

Dr. Nowreeta Milburn:

Often I think as researchers, when we're trying to "solve a social problem", we don't think about asking the people who are perceived as having the problem. And often people know having lived through it the best ways to solve it.

Marisa Zapata:

I will let you have the last word. That was a great way to end our chat together. I want to be mindful of time. Thank y'all so much. This is a great conversation. And it's just, I really appreciate you taking time out of your day to talk more and share your knowledge.

Earl Edwards:

Yeah, thanks for having us.

Outro:

That was Dr. Nowreeta Milburn and Earl Edwards, researchers from UCLA talking about key findings from their recent study, inequity in the Permanent Supportive Housing system in Los Angeles, scale, scope and reasons for black residents return to homelessness, the higher rates of homelessness and inequitable outcomes near trends across country.

Outro:

To learn more, including finding a copy of the report, go to our website at www.understandinghomelessness.org. Thanks for listening.