



## HEALTH CARE AND THE HOMELESS

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- ***People experiencing homelessness are 3-4 times more likely to die prematurely than the general population because they lack access to health care services.*** Most Americans expect to live to be at least 80; yet, for those that routinely experience homelessness, the probable life span is somewhere around 47 years. The burden of early death is especially high in young women between the ages of 18 and 34; they are 4-31 times more likely to lose their lives than their housed counterparts.
- Children that begin life experiencing homelessness will be sick more often than their housed peers, especially if they're five years old or younger. They will have twice as many ear infections, four times as many asthma attacks, five times more stomach problems, six times as many speech problems, and twice as many hospitalizations – ***including 60 percent more emergency room visits***, than housed kids.
- ***Many homeless children who lack health coverage do not obtain even the most basic interventions.*** For example, 33 percent of homeless children lack essential immunizations, 27 percent of homeless children have never seen a dentist, 33 percent of homeless children under the age of six have never been screened for lead poisoning, and 15 percent of homeless children receive their only medical care in emergency rooms. At least 90 percent of all homeless patients that come to the Coalition for health care are uninsured.
- While poor mental or physical health can sometimes be the primary cause of homelessness, more often it is homelessness that causes or contributes to health problems. Chronic and acute health problems often result from poor living conditions and contribute to the inability of an individual or family to break the cycle of homelessness. ***In the struggle to survive, health care often takes second place to the more basic needs of food and shelter.*** This forced neglect can allow minor health problems to progress until they become life-threatening illness. The first encounter with the health care system will occur only when the problem has finally become so bothersome that it no longer can be ignored.
- The rates of both chronic and acute health problems are extremely high among the homeless population. With the exception of obesity, strokes, and cancer, ***homeless people are far more likely than their housed peers to suffer from every category of chronic health problem.***
- Many homeless people have multiple health problems. For example, frostbite, leg ulcers and upper respiratory infections are frequent, often the direct result of homelessness. People experiencing homelessness are also at greater risk of trauma resulting from muggings, beatings, and rape. ***Homelessness precludes good nutrition, good personal hygiene, and basic first aid, adding to the complex health needs of homeless people.***
- ***Chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes can be difficult to treat properly in the general population and are almost impossible to control among the homeless.*** Due to the scarcity of personal resources, a homeless, insulin-dependent diabetic may face multiple problems in controlling his or her disease. Control of the diet is difficult if the only source of meals is what is served in a shelter or soup kitchen. A homeless person generally does not have regular access to a refrigerator to store insulin, and insulin needles that have not been properly cleaned can lead to infections.

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