



Environment, Homelessness, and Other Risk Factors

- People Experiencing Homelessness (PEH) and people who are unstably housed and living on the margins are particularly vulnerable to environmental or weather events and climate change due to the lack of access to financial resources, protective shelter, equipment, and clothing.
- Chronic health conditions such as diabetes, respiratory disease, and cardiovascular disease are common among PEH and may increase the risk of harm from severe environmental conditions. For example, adults experiencing homelessness have 60–70% higher rates of cardiovascular events than the total population.
- Historical housing segregation and the inability to access areas of opportunity is linked to an increased incidence of cardiovascular disease among Black adults and higher rates of high blood pressure and cholesterol in Latino neighborhoods.
- The chance of death from extreme weather is elevated among people with psychiatric disabilities, alcohol dependency, and cognitive impairment, all of which are more prevalent among people experiencing homelessness. Suicide rates, for example, are disproportionately high in extreme temperatures. For people with schizophrenia, medications may interfere with both temperature regulation. Other PEH with mental illness, may simply not be in position to seek shelter or accept assistance.
- Hospital admission rates and emergency room visits among PEH increase during extreme weather and periods of poor air quality due, in part, to health impacts. PEH are also more likely to access emergency medical services as an alternative to shelter during these events.
- Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) tend to face environmental racism, meaning they are disproportionately burdened by environmental hazards like heavy industry, pollution from traffic, and toxic waste facilities.

¹ New Study: Housing is Important for Heart Health | National Low ... (n.d.). Retrieved September 22, 2021, from <https://nlihc.org/resource/new-study-housing-important-heart-health>

² Ibid

³ Mental Health and Stress-Related Disorders | CDC

⁴ Ibid

Climate Change, Natural Disasters, and Displacement

Climate change is expected to increase the frequency and intensity of disasters such as pandemics, heat waves, droughts, wildfires, and floods.⁵ Globally, natural disasters make 14 million people homeless each year. Most recovery resources tend to be directed to higher income and whiter communities.

- **Pandemics:** Climate change means greater risk of germ spillover between wildlife and human population, creating fertile ground for pandemics. As with COVID-19, stay-at-home orders and other recommended protective measures do not provide realistic guidance for people who are unhoused or in inadequate, overcrowded housing or shelter, leaving them particularly vulnerable.
- **Droughts:** Water is essential to life, making periods of drought particularly punishing for PEH who already lack regular access to clean water.
- **Extreme Temperatures:** According to one study out of Toronto, Canada, 88% of participants reported that extreme temperatures have had a negative impact on their health.⁶ Intense heat in urban areas where the majority of PEH reside is particularly dangerous. Denver ranks third among cities with severe urban heat.⁷
- **Wildfires:** Not only do wildfires destroy homes and displace people, but they also lead to poor air quality conditions. Exposure to particulate matter from wildfires is a growing threat to PEH who may spend long periods of time outside.



My eyes felt stuffy and red. I work in gardening. This was not my first time having to be outside experiencing a wildfire, but it was really hard to adjust being outside this time. This is climate change, and it must be addressed before it wipes out humanity. I'm thankful I am not homeless right now.

Jesse, Colorado Coalition for the Homeless client, speaking from Globeville-Elyria-Swansea in the aftermath of the Dixie fires. With the help of CCH, Jesse is now living in a subsidized home.

⁵ 201710-IDMC-Global-disaster-displacement-risk.pdf. (n.d.). Retrieved September 22, 2021, from <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/201710-IDMC-Global-disaster-displacement-risk.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNWWWEPLTPxM>

⁷ <https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/blog/heat-waves-and-homelessness-record-setting-heat-puts-people-experiencing-homelessness-risk>

Moving Forward

Making connections between environment, health, and housing plays an important role in advancing good, equitable public policy. Policy solutions may include:

- Investing in sustainable, green housing infrastructure;
- Funding universal housing vouchers so all eligible households can access housing;
- Improving emergency interventions like warming, cooling, and clean air shelters that are responsive rather than reactive;
- Tracking and reporting emergency room use and mortality data for PEH related to environmental conditions; and
- Pushing back against the history of inequitable housing policies like redlining and those that disproportionately expose low-income people and BIPOC to environmental hazards.

Housing alone will not protect against climate change, natural disasters, and extreme weather events, however, Colorado's dearth of housing disproportionately puts PEH at risk of harm and even death. Policy interventions will become increasingly important moving forward.



Opportunity Starts at Home: Colorado

From better health to food security to good education, housing is foundational to every aspect of well-being, building stronger communities, promoting economic growth, and providing opportunities for everyone to thrive.

Our Colorado-based, multi-sector coalition is working in coordination with the National Low-Income Housing Coalition to generate widespread support for local, state, and federal policies that correct long-standing racial inequities and economic injustices that have prevented access to affordable, quality housing for people with low incomes.

Learn more and see coalition partners at www.ColoradoCoalition.org/OSAH