



## WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS?

A homeless person is an individual without permanent housing who...

- lives on the streets;
- stays in a shelter, mission, single room occupancy facility, abandoned building, vehicle, or other unstable situation;
- lives 'doubled up' with friends and/or extended family members; or
- does not have stable housing to which to return following release from a prison or hospital.

Recognition of the instability of an individual's living arrangement is critical to the definition of homelessness.

*Principles of Practice: A Clinical Resource Guide for Health Care for the Homeless Programs Bureau of Primary Health Care Health Resources and Services Administration U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*

## HOMELESSNESS AND HEALTH:

# Challenges to Care

### Unstable housing

- Increases risk for serious health problems
- Complicates treatment adherence and recovery

### Limited access to nutritious food & water

- Irregular meals with little dietary choice
- Higher risk for dehydration

### Higher rates of communicable disease

- Respiratory/sexually transmitted infections including HIV
- Skin diseases and infestations

### Serious & complex medical conditions

- Increased risk for acute/chronic diseases with multiple comorbidities
- More acute, life-threatening conditions due to delayed care

### Lack of health insurance/resources

- Limits access to specialty care and prescription drugs
- Over half of homeless people nationwide are uninsured

### Lack of transportation

- Limits access to health care
- Presents obstacle to employment, especially in rural areas

### Discontinuous/inaccessible health care

- From lack of health insurance, mobility, fragmented health services that are ill prepared to deal with complex psychosocial problems

### Chronic stress

- Anxiety associated with homelessness, struggle to meet basic needs
- Has negative effects on health, development, and learning

### Developmental discrepancies

- Developmental regression/neuropsychological dysfunction common regardless of age, gender, diagnosis, or medical/psychiatric history

### Higher rates of abuse

- Over 80% homeless women victims of severe physical/sexual assault
- Homeless children 2–3 times more likely than others to be abused

### Behavioral health problems

- Higher incidence of mental illness, substance use disorders
- Increase risk for disease; can interfere with treatment adherence

### Physical/cognitive impairments

- Secondary to trauma, mental illness, chronic substance use, infection, stroke, tumor, poisoning, developmental disabilities

### Barriers to disability assistance

- Insufficient documentation of impairments for SSI/SSI claims
- Restrict access to housing and health care, especially for mentally ill

### Cultural/linguistic barriers

- Minorities over-represented; health disparities apparent
- Limited English proficiency, cultural insensitivity of providers – obstacles to care

### Limited education/literacy

- Less likely to have completed education beyond high school
- Many do not read English well or are unable to read at all

### Lack of social supports

- Far from place of origin, seeking jobs, services or respite from abuse
- Alienated from family and friends, stigmatized, isolated

### Criminalization of homelessness

- Arrests for activities that are permissible within the privacy of a home
- Medications often confiscated during arrest, not returned
- Criminal record an obstacle to employment, housing, services

## YOUR LOCAL CONTACT:



*from Adapting Your Practice: General Recommendations for the Care of Homeless Patients* Health Care for the Homeless Clinicians' Network available at [www.nhchc.org](http://www.nhchc.org)

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