

Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, 2006

The Hard, Cold Facts About the Deaths of Homeless People

Information from the National Health Care for the Homeless Council

Homelessness dramatically elevates one's risk of illness, injury and death.

For every age group, homeless persons are three times more likely to die than the general population. Middle-aged homeless men and young homeless women are at particularly increased risk.¹

The average age of death of homeless persons is about 50 years, the age at which Americans commonly died in 1900.² Today, non-homeless Americans can expect to live to age 78.³

Homeless people suffer the same illnesses experienced by people with homes, but at rates three to six times higher.⁴ This includes potentially lethal communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and influenza, as well as cancer, heart disease, diabetes and hypertension.

Homeless persons die from illnesses that can be treated or prevented. Crowded, poorly-ventilated living conditions, found in many shelters, promote the spread of communicable diseases. Research shows that risk of death on the streets is only moderately affected by substance abuse or mental illness, which must also be understood as health problems. *Physical* health conditions such as heart problems or cancer are more likely to lead to an early death for homeless persons. The difficulty getting rest, maintaining medications, eating well, staying clean and staying warm prolong and exacerbate illnesses, sometimes to the point where they are life threatening.

¹ O'Connell, Jim, MD. *Premature Mortality in Homeless Populations: A Review of the Literature* Nashville: National Health Care for the Homeless Council, December 2005. p.13. <http://www.nhchc.org/PrematureMortalityFinal.pdf>

² O'Connell, p. 13.

³ National Center for Health Statistics, at <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/lifexpec.htm>

⁴ Wright JD. "Poor People, Poor Health: The health status of the homeless." In Brickner PW, Scharer LK, Conanan BA, Savarese M, Scanlan BC. *Under the Safety Net: The Health and Social Welfare of the Homeless in the United States*. New York: WW Norton & Co., 1990: 15–31.

Homeless persons die on the streets from exposure to the cold. In the coldest areas, homeless persons with a history of frostbite, immersion foot, or hypothermia have an eightfold risk of dying when compared to matched non-homeless controls.⁵

Homeless persons die on the streets from unprovoked violence, also known as hate crimes. For the years 1999 through 2005, the National Coalition for the Homeless has documented 472 acts of violence against homeless people by housed people, including 169 murders of homeless people and 303 incidents of non-lethal violence in 165 cities from 42 states and Puerto Rico.

Poor access to quality health care reduces the possibility of recovery from illnesses and injuries. Nationally, 71% of Health Care for the Homeless clients are uninsured,⁶ as were 46.6 million other Americans in 2005.⁷

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council works to end the deadly conditions and injustices described above. We recognize and believe that

- *homelessness is unacceptable;*
- *every person has the right to adequate food, housing, clothing and health care;*
- *all people have the right to participate in the decisions affecting their lives;*
- *contemporary homelessness is the product of conscious social and economic policy decisions that have retreated from a commitment to insuring basic life necessities for all people; and*
- *the struggle to end homelessness and alleviate its consequences takes many forms, including efforts to insure adequate housing, health care, and access to meaningful work.*

To learn more, or to contribute to the work of the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, please visit www.nhchc.org or contact us at PO Box 60427, Nashville TN 37206-0427, (615) 226-2292, council@nhchc.org.

⁵ O'Connell, p. 7.

⁶ Health Resources and Services Administration, Bureau of Primary Health Care, Uniform Data System 2004. http://www.bphc.hrsa.gov/hchirc/about/prog_successes.htm

⁷ United States Census Bureau. "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2005." <http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p60-231.pdf>