



Who are the homeless? Mental Health and Homelessness

Individuals experiencing poor mental health are more susceptible to the three main factors that can lead to homelessness: poverty, disaffiliation, and personal vulnerability. Because the severity of mental health symptoms is often unpredictable, individuals often lack the capacity to sustain employment, resulting in little to no income. Delusional thinking may lead them to withdraw from friends, family, and other people, leaving them without the support system to sustain them through significant mental health episodes. Mental illness can also impair a person's ability to be resilient and resourceful; it can cloud thinking and impair judgment. Without sound thinking and judgement, individuals experiencing poor mental health are vulnerable to others who may seek to harm or take advantage of them. For all these reasons, people with mental illness are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness.

People with poor mental health are more susceptible to the factors that contribute to homelessness.

Homelessness amplifies poor mental health.

Beyond the existing reality that poor mental health contributes to homelessness rates, experiencing homelessness itself amplifies poor mental health. Stress caused by experiencing homelessness may exacerbate previous mental illness and encourage anxiety, fear, depression, sleeplessness, and substance use. The needs of people experiencing homelessness with mental illnesses are similar to those without mental illnesses: physical safety, education, transportation, affordable housing, and affordable medical/dental treatment. When providing care to those experiencing homelessness, it is essential to create a non-threatening and supportive atmosphere, address basic needs (e.g. food and shelter), and provide accessible care.

Simply being without a home amplifies poor mental health conditions.

Homelessness creates new health problems and exacerbates existing ones.

Individuals experiencing poor mental health and diagnosed mental illness often experience homelessness for longer periods of time and have less contact with family and friends. In general, 30-35% of those experiencing homelessness, and up to 75% of women experiencing homelessness, have mental illnesses. Twenty to twenty-five percent of people experiencing homelessness suffer from severe mental illness and addictions. Individuals who have severe mental illnesses over-represent those experiencing homelessness, as they are often released from hospitals and jails without proper community support and resources in place.

Better mental health services means more than just housing.

Improving mental health services would not only address mental illness, but also homelessness. In a survey conducted by the United States Conference of Mayors, 20% of cities listed better coordination with mental health service providers as one of the top three items needed to address homelessness. Contrary to popular belief, many individuals who are experiencing homelessness and also suffer with severe mental illnesses are willing to accept treatment and services. Outreach programs are more successful when workers establish a trusting relationship through continued contact with the individuals they are trying to help.

Simply providing individuals experiencing homelessness and mental illness with housing is not the solution, though. Individuals are unlikely to achieve residential stability unless they also have access to continued treatment and services. Research through the National Mental Health Association has shown that supported housing is effective for people with mental illnesses. Individuals experiencing homeless and mental illnesses are more likely to recover and achieve residential stability if they have access to resources to continued mental health care and a consistent support system.

Unfortunately, lack of funding is a significant barrier to the successful implementation of continued mental health services. Funding is available through various government programs run by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, as well as from the Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH). However, there are still not enough resources to provide adequate services to the homeless population and those at risk for homelessness.

While health care providers do all they can to mitigate the effects of the streets, no amount of health care can be a substitute for stable housing.

The solution: community-based mental health services.

Community-based mental health services play an important role. Homelessness could be drastically reduced if individuals experiencing severe mental illness were able to access continual mental health services as well as other necessary community support. Individuals experiencing poor mental health encounter more barriers to employment and tend to be in poorer physical health than other individuals experiencing homelessness. Housing outreach services that provide a safe place to live are a vital component of stabilizing illness and helping individuals on their journey to wellness.

Learn More:

National Coalition for the Homeless, [Fact Sheets, Mental Illness](#)

[National Mental Health Association](#)

[Mental Health Cooperative](#)

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