

Homelessness and Health: What's the Connection?

The connection between housing and homelessness is generally intuitive, but the equally strong link between health and homelessness is often overlooked. Homelessness includes a broad range of children/youth, families, older/elderly people, those who are disabled, and many others who lack permanent housing. While individual health care needs vary widely, all people need — and deserve — access to health care.

This fact sheet describes the connection between health and homelessness, the prevalence of some health conditions, and the barriers unhoused people face when accessing care.

TYPES OF HOMELESSNESS

- Living on streets
- Living in encampments
- Living in shelters
- Transitional housing programs
- Doubled up with family and friends

NHCHC Resource: [Understanding the Definitions of Homelessness](#)

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN HEALTH AND HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness can be triggered by the onset of a health condition and perpetuated by the stress of being unhoused, along with continued exposure to unsafe living environments that worsen illness, specifically:

- **Poor health is a major cause of homelessness.** An injury or illness may prevent someone from working (or require them to reduce their hours), setting off a vicious cycle. Without stable employment and income, people often lose access to health insurance and struggle to afford care, leading them to delay or forego treatment that worsens existing conditions and makes it even harder to return to work. As financial strain and medical debt increases, savings are depleted and support from friends/family may quickly run out. What begins as a health problem can rapidly escalate into a housing crisis when individuals must choose between paying for rent, food, or medical care.
- **Homelessness creates new health problems and makes existing ones worse.** People living on the street, in encampments or in shelters are exposed to a range of communicable diseases, violence, malnutrition and exposure due to extreme weather, increasing their risk of illness and worsening preexisting health conditions.



- **Recovery and healing are more difficult without housing.** Stable housing provides the safety, rest, and recuperation needed to heal. Without it, people are trapped in a cycle where illness fuels housing instability and housing instability fuels illness. (Importantly, shelter is not housing.)

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HEALTH CONDITIONS OF UNHOUSED PEOPLE

People with the experience of homelessness face significantly worse health outcomes than those who have never been homeless. This includes chronic conditions, infectious disease, and behavioral health.

In addition to the disparities shown, unhoused people also experience:

- **Multiple chronic conditions:** Unhoused individuals are far more likely to live with [two or more chronic conditions](#).
- **Higher prevalence of communicable disease:** Crowded shelter and service settings increase risk of [tuberculosis, HIV, and hepatitis](#).
- **Higher mortality rates:** People experiencing homelessness are [3-4 times more likely to die prematurely](#) (20 years earlier on average).

BARRIERS TO RECOVERY AND HEALING

Despite greater health needs, people experiencing homelessness face barriers to receiving needed care and following medical directions. The experience of homelessness directly contributes to worsening health due to the following barriers:

- **Competition with other basic needs:** Time spent seeking food, shelter, clothing, and safety often competes with the time—and transportation—needed to routinely engage in care.
- **Encampment sweeps:** Forced removals are traumatic and alienating—and undermine health care treatment. Medications, walkers/canes/wheelchairs, tents and other survival equipment are thrown away; people are pushed to ever-more remote areas with no access to clean water; and people live in constant fear of being arrested or harassed.
- **Cost & complexity of care:** Being uninsured or burdened with copays, prescription drug costs, and other out-of pocket charges makes it difficult for low-income people to afford care. Similarly, navigating referrals, paperwork, provider networks, eligibility criteria, and other administrative complexities can discourage seeking care.
- **Difficulty treating wounds and healing from illness:** Limited access to bathing or other hygiene facilities, keeping bandages clean, and getting proper recuperation from illnesses and injuries is much harder when living outside or in a shelter.
- **Stigma and discrimination:** Many unhoused people report being treated with disrespect by staff at emergency rooms, hospitals, specialty care, and other health care settings—resulting in a lack of trust in health care providers.

Health Conditions: People Who Have Experienced Homelessness v. General Population

Condition	Ever Homeless	General Population
Diabetes	21%	12%
Asthma	29%	16%
High Cholesterol	51%	31%
Viral Hepatitis	18%	3%
Schizophrenia	8%	1%
Depression	62%	22%
Bipolar	27%	3%
Alcohol Disorder	43%	9%
Opioid Disorder	15%	2%

Sources: Ever homeless: [Geiger Gibson Program, Data Note, July 2025](#); General population: [diabetes, asthma, depression, and high cholesterol; schizophrenia, bipolar; Both: viral hepatitis; alcohol disorder, opioid disorder](#)

Differences Between Homeless and Non-Homeless Health Center Patients

Barrier	Homeless Patients	All CHC Patients
2+ emergency room visits in past year	35%	17%
Difficulty accessing medications	21%	10%
Poor/fair health	40%	31%
Pain interfering with daily life	49%	30%
Severe psychological distress	18%	10%
Unable to get medical care	20%	10%

Source: [Geiger Gibson Program, Data Note, July 2025](#)

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[Photo by Jeffrey Beall, via Flickr](#)

CASE STUDY: DENVER, CO.

After losing housing, a [study of 356 people](#) living in shelters and encampments found:

- 64% reported new/worsening physical health conditions
- 58% reported new/worsening mental health conditions
- Self-reported health declined by 22%
- Further, 53% reported experiencing violence in the past year

Chronic pain and depression were the most common conditions reported.

- **Undiagnosed or untreated behavioral health conditions:** Mental health and/or substance use disorders can develop (or worsen) due to the stress and trauma of homelessness, which further destabilizes the ability to seek care.

These barriers to accessing health care result in worse outcomes for people experiencing homelessness and underscore the ongoing connection between poor health and homelessness. Data comparing patients at HCH programs to those at other Community Health Centers (CHCs) show stark disparities in access to care and health status (see bottom table on page 2).

THE SOLUTION: HOUSING IS HEALTH CARE

Housing and health care are deeply connected—and both are essential to preventing and ending homelessness. Health care services are more effective when a patient is in stable housing, and in turn, maintaining housing is more likely when people can access the health care services they need. Stable housing directly impacts health outcomes like chronic disease management, behavioral health recovery, and overall well-being.

Some individuals need only short-term assistance to regain health and reconnect to employment and permanent housing on their own. Others may require longer-term support services to maintain stable housing. **In every situation, housing and health care are essential to individual well-being and a healthy society.**

RELATED NHCHC FACT SHEETS

- [Health Care for the Homeless Programs](#)
- [The Value and Impact of Health Care for the Homeless Programs](#)
- [Impact of Encampment Sweeps on People Experiencing Homelessness](#)
- [Health Insurance and Revenue at HCH Programs, 2024](#)
- [One Big Beautiful Bill Act: Impact on the HCH Community](#)
- [Defining Characteristics of Medical Respite Care](#)



The National Health Care for the Homeless Council is the premier national organization working at the nexus of homelessness and health care. Grounded in human rights and social justice, the NHCHC mission is to build an equitable, high-quality health care system through training, research, and advocacy in the movement to end homelessness. Visit [nhchc.org](#) to learn more.