



Homelessness and Mental Health: Impacts and Strategies for Effective Care

Highlights & Key Concepts

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Summary Ideas:

Three main causes of homelessness: Poverty, lack of affordable housing, and structural racism

What we know about people experiencing homelessness:

- People who are homeless are at an elevated risk
- People experiencing homelessness present unique treatment challenges
- Preventive services for people experiencing homelessness are critical
- Treatment providers must be knowledgeable
- Person-centered prevention and trauma-informed treatment practices are essential
- Providers should work with federal, state, and community-based agencies
- Clinicians must know how to help individuals access federal or local benefits

How access to housing affects the situation:

- At its heart, the homelessness crisis is due to lack of affordable housing
- Existing housing stock with lower rents has disappeared
- People who are extremely low income (ELI) are at the highest risk

The connection between homelessness and mental illness is a complicated, two-way relationship:

- An individual's mental health issues may lead to cognitive and behavioral problems that make it difficult to earn a stable income or to carry out daily activities in ways that encourage stable housing.
- However, people also often find themselves homeless primarily due to poverty and a lack of low-income housing.
- Options for housing for low-income individuals have struggled to keep pace with the need.

Questions & Responses:

Q1 *What can we better understand about the experience of someone living unsheltered/unhoused and the impact on their mental health?*

A1 We can understand the difficulty and the immense challenges people face when striving to extricate themselves and find and maintain housing. It is incredibly difficult to end homelessness once you are there for anyone. If you understand the arduous challenges unsheltered/unhoused people face when trying to secure housing and integrate into the community, then you'll have a far deeper sense of compassion and understanding about the extensive complexities and struggles involved in exiting homelessness.

Q2 *What is shelter diversion?*

A2 Shelter diversion is often defined as engaging people who are seeking shelter and making sure that this is the only option. Diversion specialists can offer help with mediating, problem solving, and accessing financial assistance.

Q3 *Why are people 50 years and older more likely to experience homelessness?*

A3 One factor is that housing for ages 55+ (or 62+) is vanishing because the HUD subsidies are expiring. These are 30-year subsidies that were agreed to in the 1990s. Once expired, the developer sells them off for a profit.

Q4 *How can we make a lasting impact on people experiencing homelessness in our community?*

A4 To make a lasting impact, we must not get distracted by things that do not work to end homelessness. We know what works so, let's talk about those things, fund those things, etc.

Q5 *Are there demographic differences between rural homeless populations and urban homeless populations?*

A5 Yes. Women, white individuals, and Latinx individuals make up a higher proportion of the rural homeless population as compared to the urban homeless population. Overall, rates of homelessness in rural areas are lower than in urban areas. ([source](#)) Learn more about statistics, State data and other information at <https://endhomelessness.org/>

Q6 *How does the SOAR program go about expedited disability/SSDI?*

A6 SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) is a [model](#) designed to increase access to disability income benefits for individuals who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. It seeks to end homelessness through increased access to SSI/SSDI income support. Learn more and access free training: <https://soarworks.samhsa.gov/>

Q7 *It seems that most of the resources available for homeless individuals are only available when a person is already in a critical state – are there any thoughts on how to navigate around this?*

A7 We need to advocate for and pass policies that prioritize prevention and diversion services. We also need to expand affordable and supportive housing options. Most of the available existing resources are for people in crisis because our mainstream culture views homelessness as an individual problem. In reality, homelessness occurs because our social safety nets are failing.

Q8 *What are some ways we can make a lasting impact on the homeless in our communities?*

Per the [National Alliance to End Homelessness \(NAEH\) Solutions website](#):

- A8**
- A community-wide coordinated approach to delivering services, housing, and programs.
 - Housing is the Solution and Rapid re-housing is designed to quickly connect people to housing & services.
 - Sometimes people need longer-term rental assistance and services supports to achieve stability. Permanent supportive housing is a proven solution to homelessness for the most vulnerable.
 - An effective crisis response system can help people quickly exit homelessness.
 - Programs designed to assist low-income people increase their employment and income are critical to supporting housing stability.

Resources:

- [Identifying, Deconstructing, and Reducing Stigma Toolkit](#)
- [Recovery Oriented Language Guide](#), Mental Health Coordinating Council
- [Implicit Bias: An Overview](#), Equal Justice Society
- [SAMHSA toolkit Whole-Person Care for People Experiencing Homelessness and Opioid Use Disorder](#)
- [SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery \(SOAR\)](#)

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