

Population At-Risk: Homelessness and the COVID-19 Crisis

As COVID-19-related quarantines were being implemented across America, [homelessness researchers](#) were estimating the immediate needs of people experiencing homelessness. They concluded that \$11.5 billion is necessary for 400,000 new shelter beds needed to accommodate everyone who is unsheltered and to ensure appropriate social distancing, and the creation of quarantine locations for the sick and exposed.

These recommendations were informed by factors that make people experiencing homelessness uniquely vulnerable to COVID-19 and could greatly increase homelessness. These factors should inform a broad range of policies and practices for the foreseeable future.

An Aging Population

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has warned that people 65 years and older may be at [higher risk](#) of becoming severely ill from COVID-19.

In recent years, medical researchers have been increasingly focused on older adults experiencing homelessness. They are finding that this group [ages faster](#) than everyone else. Study participants in their 50s have been found to experience geriatric conditions (e.g., memory loss, falls, functional impairments) at rates similar to members of the general population in their 70s.

Thus, discussions about medically vulnerable older adults now include people as young as 45-50.

Here's what we know about the size of this group:

- *Sheltered:* [324,512 people](#) over the age of 50 stayed in homeless shelters in 2016-2017, representing **23 percent** of the entire shelter population.
- *Unsheltered:* An estimated **107,194 individuals over the age of 45** were living unsheltered on a single night in 2019.¹
- *Growing Numbers:* Even before the current health/economic crisis, the older adult homeless population was projected to [trend upwards](#) until 2030. For example, in Los Angeles, the 65+ population was expected to [increase by 54 percent](#) over the next five years.

Existing Health Conditions

The CDC has warned that, like older adults, people with serious [medical conditions](#) may be uniquely at-risk of becoming seriously ill due to COVID-19. Homelessness is associated with health challenges. For many, poor health was the cause of their homelessness. Profound and/or prolonged

¹ Estimate based on a 1) across-regional responses to the [VI-SPDAT survey](#), finding that 60 percent of unsheltered people are in this age group and 2) HUD's AHAR Report detailing the nation-wide [Point-in-Time count](#) of unsheltered individuals.

illness can result in the loss of a job or other income. Being homeless, outdoors and in crowded settings can also compromise one's health.

A [recent study](#) of homeless adults found significant self-reports of health challenges:

- Physical Health Problems
 - **84 percent** of *unsheltered* people
 - **19 percent** of *sheltered* people
- Mental Health Problems
 - **78 percent** of *unsheltered* people
 - **50 percent** of *sheltered* people
- Substance Abuse Conditions
 - **75 percent** of *unsheltered* people
 - **13 percent** of *sheltered* people
- Trimorbidity (Co-occurring physical health, mental health, and substance abuse challenges)
 - **50 percent** of *unsheltered* people
 - **2 percent** of *sheltered* people

Existing physical health conditions may make it harder for the body to defend against new ones. Mental health, substance abuse, and trimorbidity challenges (combined with unstable housing) may hinder self-care and the receipt of health care services.

General Wellness Care

Crowded shelters and encampments, sleeping outdoors, and housing instability make it difficult to engage in activities that can help ward off illnesses:

- *Eating Sufficient and Nutritious Food.* On a typical day, access to food can be inconsistent for people who have limited resources to purchase it and a lack of places to cook and store food. Historically, researchers have documented high rates of [food insecurity](#) among homeless adults. For example, one study found food insecurity among **56 percent** of homeless participants—and this food insecurity was linked to a greater likelihood of hospitalization and outpatient medical visits.

Circumstances are further complicated by COVID-19-related disruptions of daily life. Quarantined employees and volunteers, business closures, and supply shortages may disrupt the delivery of food to those in need—especially over the long term.

- *Getting Sufficient Sleep/Rest.* Stress and existing health conditions have been linked to [inadequate sleep](#) among people experiencing homelessness. Additionally, exposed and congregate settings can be noisy and may require vigilance in guarding one's safety and possessions—also disrupting sleep/rest.
- *Social Distancing.* Currently recommended social distancing can be difficult in congregate settings (shelters and encampments). Limited system resources combined with great need can translate into crowded conditions that [ease the spread](#) of airborne infections and communicable infections.

- *Hygiene.* Living unsheltered, or only in shelters at night, often limits access to running water needed for frequent hand washing and generally keeping clean.

Potential Homeless Population Growth

COVID-19 is an immediate concern. When it is combined with previous troubling trends, there is a danger of increasing numbers of people experiencing homelessness (including related health and instability challenges). The following factors are relevant:

- *Rising Older Adult Homelessness.* As noted, older adult homelessness was projected to experience steep increases even before the current health and economic crises.
- *Rising Unsheltered Homeless.* Unsheltered homelessness has already been [trending upwards](#) since 2016, growing by **22 percent** over the last five years.
- *On the Brink.* Far too many Americans are severely housing cost burdened—**10.9 million households** spend more than 50 percent of their income on housing. In an economic crisis, the loss of a job or hours at work could quickly lead to homelessness.

Further Information

The Alliance has created an [information portal](#) focused on homelessness and the COVID-19 crisis. It includes helpful resources like those included below.

- [US Department of Housing and Urban Development Resources](#)
This page provides a comprehensive information on Disease Risks and Homelessness from HUD with a specific emphasis on COVID-19.
- [US Department of Housing and Urban Development COVID-19 Webinar](#)
This webinar features subject matter experts and is meant to identify essential community partnerships needed to prepare for and respond to COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness.
- [US Centers for Disease Control Plan-Prepare-Respond Guidance](#)
This site provides Interim Guidance for Homeless Shelters responding to COVID-19. It covers planning for disease outbreaks, what to do during a crisis, and the follow up needed after the crisis.
- [National Health Care for the Homeless Resources](#)
This page provides a multitude of resources from federal, state, and local communities, as well as people with lived experience.
- [US Interagency Council on Ending Homelessness Resources](#)
USICH is providing several resources that can be used by homelessness services systems in response to COVID-19.
- [Seattle King County Public Health Department Interim Guidance on COVID-19](#)
This document provides guidance on how to prevent and handle COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness.

- [Corporation for Supportive Housing Resources for Housing Providers](#)
This page provides information for Permanent Supportive Housing and Affordable Housing providers to help prepare and mitigate effects of COVID-19.