

Received Date: July 08, 2024

Accepted Date: July 29, 2024

Published Date: August 01, 2024

Available Online at <https://www.ijsrisjournal.com/index.php/ojsfiles/article/view/299>

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14583384>

Homelessness, Unsheltered Status, and Risk Factors for Mortality: A Comprehensive Review

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ABSTRACT

Homelessness, particularly unsheltered homelessness, is a severe public health issue linked to increased mortality rates. This review examines the association between homelessness and mortality, highlighting the unique challenges faced by unsheltered individuals. It explores key risk factors, including mental health disorders, substance abuse, chronic diseases, and environmental exposure. Additionally, it evaluates interventions aimed at mitigating mortality risks among homeless populations, emphasizing the need for integrated healthcare and social support systems.

Introduction

Homelessness represents a complex societal issue with profound implications for public health. As of recent estimates, over 150 million people worldwide experience homelessness, with a significant proportion living without adequate shelter (United Nations, 2020). Unsheltered homelessness refers to individuals living in places not meant for habitation, such as streets, parks, or vehicles. These individuals face heightened risks of morbidity and mortality due to environmental exposures, lack of access to healthcare, and increased vulnerability to violence and substance abuse(1).

This review investigates the relationship between homelessness and mortality, focusing on the specific risks associated with unsheltered status. It discusses current interventions and policies aimed at addressing these challenges and identifies gaps in existing strategies. (2,3)

1. Mortality Risks Associated with Homelessness

a) Chronic Health Conditions

Homeless individuals experience disproportionately high rates of chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and respiratory illnesses. Limited access to healthcare exacerbates these conditions, leading to poor management and increased mortality.

b) Mental Health Disorders and Substance Abuse

Co-occurring mental health disorders and substance abuse are prevalent among homeless populations, particularly unsheltered individuals. These issues are strongly associated with suicide and drug overdose, which are leading causes of death in this demographic(4).

c) Environmental Exposure

Unsheltered individuals are directly exposed to harsh weather conditions, increasing the risk of hypothermia, heatstroke, and

frostbite. These environmental factors significantly contribute to the mortality gap between sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals (Ramin & Svoboda, 2009).

d) Violence and Trauma

Homelessness, particularly in unsheltered settings, exposes individuals to a high risk of physical and sexual violence. This violence contributes to both immediate and long-term health consequences, including increased mortality (5)

2. Impact of Unsheltered Homelessness

Unsheltered homelessness presents unique challenges that exacerbate health risks:

- **Lack of Sanitation:** Unsheltered individuals often lack access to clean water, restrooms, and waste disposal, increasing the risk of infectious diseases.
- **Social Isolation:** The absence of community support networks exacerbates mental health challenges and reduces access to healthcare resources.
- **Barriers to Care:** Unsheltered individuals face logistical and systemic barriers to healthcare, including lack of transportation, stigma, and insufficient outreach services(6).

3. Interventions to Reduce Mortality Risks

a) Integrated Healthcare Models

Comprehensive healthcare programs that address physical, mental, and substance abuse issues have shown promise in reducing mortality among homeless populations. For instance, mobile health clinics and outreach programs improve access to care for unsheltered individuals (7).

b) Housing First Programs

The Housing First approach prioritizes providing permanent housing without preconditions, enabling individuals to stabilize their lives and access healthcare and social services. Evidence suggests that this approach significantly reduces mortality rates (8).

c) Community-Based Interventions

Community-driven initiatives, such as peer support programs and harm reduction strategies, are effective in addressing substance abuse and improving mental health outcomes (Kertesz et al., 2009).

d) Policy and Advocacy

Policies aimed at increasing affordable housing, expanding Medicaid coverage, and funding mental health and addiction services are critical to addressing the root causes of homelessness and associated mortality (9)

4. Challenges and Future Directions

While existing interventions have demonstrated success, significant gaps remain:

- **Data Limitations:** Accurate data on unsheltered populations are often lacking, hindering effective intervention planning.
- **Sustainability:** Long-term funding and political support are essential to sustaining impactful programs.
- **Tailored Approaches:** Interventions must be culturally and contextually appropriate to address the diverse needs of homeless populations.

5. Future efforts should focus on

- Strengthening cross-sector collaboration between healthcare, housing, and social services.
- Enhancing outreach to unsheltered populations through innovative technologies and community partnerships.
- Conducting longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term impact of interventions on mortality outcomes.

Conclusion

Homelessness, especially unsheltered homelessness, is a critical determinant of health and mortality. Addressing the unique risks faced by this population requires integrated healthcare, housing-first strategies, and robust policy support. By prioritizing the health and well-being of homeless individuals, society can take significant steps toward reducing disparities and improving overall public health.

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