

MENTAL HEALTH GUIDE

# HOMELESSNESS & SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS

Silence  
the ~~Shame~~

# ABOUT THE UNHOUSED



Mental illness is one of the top problems leading to homelessness in the United States. In addition, individuals history with substance misuse and involvement in the criminal justice system also impacts the likelihood that they may experience homelessness.

In the United States at least 14 million Americans experience a stint of homelessness throughout their lifetime. At any given time in the United States there are over 500,000 unhoused individuals. This count includes those in shelters and on streets but, fails to capture the number of folks couch-surfing with no permanent address. Of the estimated unhoused, nearly 45% have experienced any mental illness and 25% were severely mentally ill.

# MENTAL ILLNESS AMONG THE UNHOUSED



- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 20 to 25% of the homeless population in the United States suffers from some form of severe mental illness.
- At any given time, there are many more people with untreated severe psychiatric illnesses living on America's streets than are receiving care in hospitals. Approximately 90,000 individuals with schizophrenia or manic-depressive illness are in all hospitals receiving treatment for their disease.
- The prevalence of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts is extremely high in mentally ill homeless persons. In a large sample of homeless adults with serious mental illness, almost 8% reported a suicide attempt within the previous 30 days.
- Patients with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder are particularly vulnerable to homelessness.

# BARRIERS TO CARE

Given their unstable housing situation, there are several barriers to providing care to the unhoused.

- **Transportation.** Homeless individuals often lack adequate transportation. Consequently, they are unable to do the necessary tasks involved in care-getting laboratory work completed, picking up medications, and getting to mental health appointments. Public transportation may not always be a solution, as it often requires multiple transfers, can be unreliable and, in some areas, may be limited or may not exist. Additionally, homeless individuals may lack the resources to pay for fares.
- **Cost of care.** For persons who are homeless, small expenses can be a significant barrier to accessing mental health care. Moreover, they may not be aware of resources available to them through Medicaid and the ACA
- **Communication.** Although some homeless adults and youth have access to cell phones, there is higher turnover of both phones and phone numbers, which can pose a barrier to consistent communication. In addition, it is difficult to keep a cellphone charged without reliable access to electricity. The same is also true for internet access and usage. Consequently, homeless people are likely to have less access to important information, including care and resources. Language barriers may also affect access to care, particularly in limited resource settings.
- **Stigma and vulnerability.** Stigma and discrimination continue against homeless individuals who also have mental health conditions. Setting health care goals may feel unattainable when pressing issues like basic survival are more salient. Homeless people with mental illness are also highly vulnerable to violence, with a reported lifetime incidence of 74% to 87% of violence being perpetrated against them. Additionally, psychiatric care may include prescribed psychotropics that affect alertness and may leave homeless individuals more at risk of violence victimization. Furthermore, those who have a history with the legal system, reintegrating into society, parole, or strained finances may further impact their ability to acquire care.

# RESOURCES FOR THE UNHOUSED



## **SAMHSA PROGRAMS & GRANTS**

- Projects for Assistance in Transition from homelessness (PATH)
- Cooperative Agreements to Benefit Homeless Individuals (CABHI)
- Grants for the Benefit of Homeless Individuals (GBHI)
- Treatment for Individuals Experiencing Homelessness (TIEH)
- SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR)

# Works Cited



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