



RESEARCH BRIEF

January 2021

Unsheltered Homelessness: Health, Social Integration, and Utilization of Novel VA Programs



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Funding: National Center on Homelessness among Veterans Intramural Award

What do we know?

Unsheltered homelessness is highly visible and associated with mortality and high health service utilization. Relatively little is known about the risk factors for unsheltered status. There is spirited public debate as to whether persons “on the streets” reflect poor housing market conditions or vulnerabilities such as addiction. Finally, VA leadership has little information regarding the uptake of relatively new VA innovations like secure messaging and use of community-based care by Veterans who are, or recently were, unsheltered.

Extensive survey data were collected by phone and mail from 5,766 homeless or formerly homeless Veterans at 26 VA Medical Centers with support of a prior award from VA Health Services Research & Development. Analyses were supported by the National Center on Homelessness among Veterans.

New information provided by the study

Key Finding #1:

Unsheltered Veterans had more vulnerabilities compared to those who were not unsheltered. The likelihood of being unsheltered reflects the cumulative impact of individual risk factors interacting with community-level factors.

Predictors of unsheltered experience were (p-values <.05):

- reporting recent unemployment and/or financial difficulties
- reporting a criminal record history and/or recent incarceration

- reporting severe chronic pain
- reporting high psychological distress
- reporting low social support and low community engagement
- reporting concerns of an alcohol and/or drug use problem(s)
- living in a more expensive rental market and/or a warmer community
- living in a community with fewer shelter beds

In communities with more expensive rental markets or warmer weather, the cumulative impact of individual risk factors was a stronger predictor for recent unsheltered experience than in communities with less expensive rental markets or colder weather. Put another way, personal risk factors influence the chance of being unsheltered, but that influence is stronger when the community itself lacks shelter beds or has warm weather. This finding, that both personal and community risk factors matter, helps to reconcile a polarized public discussion of unsheltered homelessness being mostly a result of one thing or the other. These findings are under review at the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

Key Finding #2:

Veterans with homeless experiences might, overall, require assistance to engage with secure messaging technology, but unsheltered status was not associated with reduced usage or satisfaction with this innovation.

Veterans with homeless experience had low overall uptake of secure messaging (21%), though 87% of those who used it were satisfied. There were no differences in usage or satisfaction by unsheltered status in bivariate or multivariate analysis (published in the *Journal of Addiction Medicine*, 2020).

Key Finding #3:

Community care options are utilized and valued by Veterans with homeless experiences, and unsheltered status was not associated with reduced usage or lower satisfaction of the VA Veteran's Choice Program.

We found that 27% of Veterans with homeless experience had used non-VHA care through the Veterans Choice Program, with relatively high satisfaction with care received (83%) and satisfaction with how quickly care was received (74%). There was no difference in usage or satisfaction by unsheltered status in either bivariate or multivariate analysis. These results are in press at *Medical Care*.

References

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