

# Homelessness in urban areas: The role of mental illness and need for collaboration

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**A**s an emergency department (ED) psychiatrist with 25 years of experience working in a large city, I am growing increasingly concerned about the escalating number of individuals experiencing homelessness in urban areas.

Homelessness remains a critical issue across the United States. The news reports from major urban areas are startling. In my own practice, I encounter approximately 10,000 patients annually, and at least one-half of them are homeless. Additionally, 75% of these patients who are homeless experience addiction, and many have lost all social support. Due to overcrowding at our area's shelters, they resort to using the ED as a shelter because most of our shelters are overcrowded. This situation has caused an overwhelming overload in the ED and left staff disheartened and difficult to retain.

The relationship between mental illness and homelessness is complex and multifaceted. Research suggests that up to one-third of individuals who are homeless have serious mental illness.<sup>1</sup> Mental illness can contribute to homelessness by impeding individuals' ability to maintain employment, housing, and social relationships. Conversely, homelessness can worsen mental illness (especially in younger individuals,

who are most vulnerable) by exposing individuals to traumatic experiences, substance abuse, and other stressors.<sup>2</sup>

One approach to effectively address homelessness in urban areas is provide supportive housing that incorporates access to mental health services. Research has demonstrated that offering stable housing and mental health services to individuals experiencing homelessness can significantly improve their mental and physical health and reduce their reliance on costly emergency services.<sup>3,4</sup>

Collaboration between the health care system and government is also essential. By working together, the health care system and government can develop comprehensive strategies, allocate resources, and implement interventions that address the physical and mental health needs of individuals who are homeless and provide them with the necessary support and services. This collaboration is essential to create sustainable solutions and make a meaningful impact in combating homelessness.<sup>5</sup>

Addressing homelessness in urban areas requires a comprehensive approach that recognizes the critical role of mental illness and necessity for collaborative solutions. While our ED has implemented certain measures, such as allowing patients to remain on 23-hour holds to prevent immediate re-admission, additional interventions are needed. These include expanding shelters and transitional housing programs, which are currently in short supply, and developing street medicine programs to meet individuals where they are and improve compliance

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with medications. By implementing these strategies, we can help minimize the impact of homelessness on individuals with mental illness and enhance the health and well-being of individuals experiencing homelessness.

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### Clinical Point

Stable housing that offers access to mental health services can improve the health of those experiencing homelessness