

HOMELESSNESS & HEALTH.



- Homeless people are extremely vulnerable to serious physical and mental health problems.
- Homeless people are frequent victims of assault, rape, and injury.
- It can be very difficult for homeless people to take care of themselves, and to access the health care they need.
- The average homeless person in Toronto will die before the age of 50.

PHYSICAL HEALTH ISSUES⁽¹⁻¹²⁾

- Chronic medical conditions such as **seizures, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, arthritis, and other musculoskeletal disorders** are common among homeless people.
- **Respiratory tract infections, oral and dental disease, and skin and foot problems** are also common.
- **Three-quarters of homeless people in Toronto reported that they lived with extreme fatigue, and 1 in 7 said they were usually in severe pain⁽³⁰⁾.**

MENTAL HEALTH & SUBSTANCE USE ISSUES

- **Between one-quarter and one-third of people who are homeless have a serious mental illness** such as schizophrenia, major depressive disorder, or bipolar affective disorder^(13, 14). The estimates are higher for some population groups. For example, in Toronto, **three-quarters of homeless single women have a mental illness⁽¹⁵⁾.**
- **Almost three-quarters of shelter users in Toronto have been diagnosed with substance abuse or dependence⁽¹⁶⁾.**
- **One-quarter of people who are homeless in Toronto have a concurrent disorder.** A concurrent disorder is a combination of mental health and substance use problems. People who are homeless and have a concurrent disorder are more socially isolated, more likely to be physically assaulted, have worse health status, and have poorer access to shelter than other homeless people⁽³⁰⁾.

INJURY AND ASSAULT

- **Almost half of homeless people in Toronto have been assaulted at least once** in the past year, and **almost one-quarter of homeless women have been sexually assaulted or raped at least once** in the past year^(2, 30).
- **A history of serious head injury is very common among people who are homeless.** A recent CRICH study found that the roots of homelessness may sometimes lie in a past brain injury⁽³³⁾.

BARRIERS TO HEALTH CARE

- Despite their high need, **people who are homeless encounter many barriers to receiving health care.** Common barriers include: refusal of care because a patient is not carrying their provincial health card; inability to get to physicians' offices during regular office hours; feelings of stigmatization; and/or lack of transportation to health visits⁽¹⁷⁾.

EARLY DEATH

- **The average lifespan of homeless people in Canada is 7-10 years shorter than the general Canadian population.** A recent CRICH study found that homeless men in Canada have about the same chance of surviving to age 75 as an average man in 1921 - before the advent of antibiotics⁽³⁴⁾.
- **In Toronto, homeless people are 2-10 times more likely to die than the general Canadian population.** CRICH studies show that on average, homeless men in Toronto die at 46, and homeless women die at 39^(31, 32).

INFECTIOUS DISEASE

- **People who are homeless are at much higher risk of contracting infectious disease** like tuberculosis, HIV, and Hepatitis C, compared to the general population⁽¹⁸⁻³⁰⁾.
- **Nearly one-quarter of homeless people in Toronto have Hepatitis C⁽³⁰⁾**, compared with less than one percent of the Canadian population. Hepatitis C is commonly transmitted through the sharing of drug-use equipment like needles, straws and pipes. 94% of homeless people with Hepatitis C in Toronto said they had used substances in the past year to help cope with stress or pain, or to feel better about their lives⁽³⁰⁾.

BARRIERS TO SELF CARE

- Homelessness entails a daily struggle for the essentials of life. These **competing priorities can lead people who are homeless to “discount” their health** in favour of other, more critical, day-to-day needs.
- In Toronto, **almost three-quarters of homeless people with diabetes report difficulties managing their condition**. These difficulties are usually related to diet and scheduling⁽¹⁰⁾.
- Coordinating meals with medications can also be difficult if a person often goes hungry - **two-thirds of homeless people report being hungry at least one day a week⁽³⁰⁾**.

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The Centre for Research on Inner City Health (CRICH) is part of the Keenan Research Centre in the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute of St. Michael's Hospital.

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