



Addressing COVID-19 and Homelessness at a Large Federally Qualified Health Center

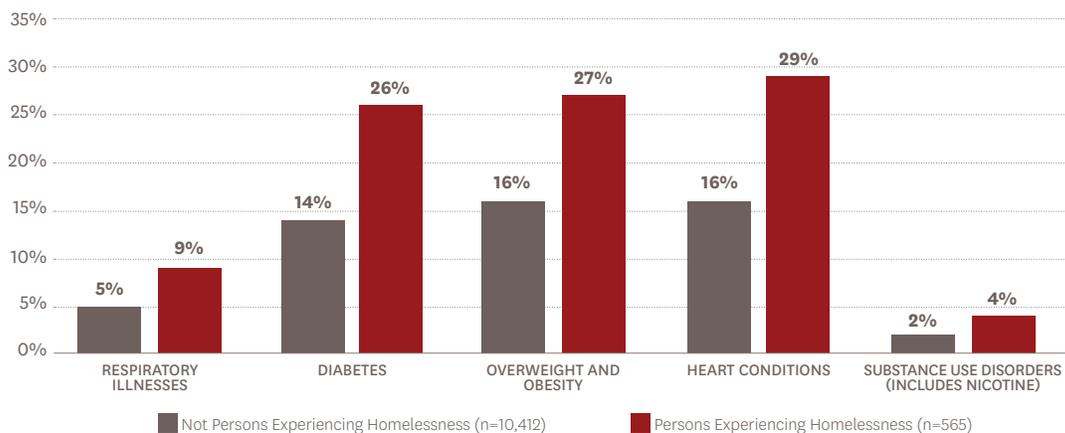
By Lauren Graves, based on research conducted by Dr. Melissa Chinchilla, Research Scientist, AltaMed

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on public health around the world, and has been especially devastating for vulnerable populations, including persons experiencing homelessness. This research brief summarizes the findings of a research project led by Dr. Melissa Chinchilla that aimed to gain a better understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on persons experiencing homelessness. Researchers analyzed key differences between AltaMed patients who were identified by healthcare workers as experiencing homelessness and those who were identified as not experiencing homelessness, as well as interviewing a sub-sample of patients who self-identified as experiencing housing instability, including homelessness.

The researchers utilized Electronic Health Record (EHR) data to assess AltaMed patients that were tested for COVID-19 between March 12, 2020 and March 12, 2021 using key characteristics that included housing status, demographic characteristics, health outcomes, and health conditions (Figure 1). They also assessed AltaMed efforts to address the needs of COVID-19 patients experiencing homelessness across racial and ethnic groups, with measures that included efficacy of guidance at clinical assessment, progression of symptomology, self-reported spread, and success in connecting flagged patients to housing services.

FIGURE 1. UNDERLYING HEALTH CONDITIONS IN PATIENTS WHO TESTED POSITIVE FOR COVID-19





METHODS

The research team utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to compare the impact of COVID-19 on AltaMed patients experiencing homelessness and patients who were not experiencing homelessness.

- The quantitative research was comprised of bivariate analyses that examined differences in key demographic and health characteristics of their sample for three comparison groups:
 - Among patients who were tested for COVID-19, researchers compared differences for persons experiencing homelessness and persons not experiencing homelessness.
 - Among patients who tested positive for COVID-19, researchers compared differences for persons experiencing homelessness and persons not experiencing homelessness.
 - Among patients experiencing homelessness who were tested for COVID-19, researchers analyzed differences for persons experiencing homelessness who tested positive for COVID-19 and persons experiencing homelessness who tested negative for COVID-19.
- The qualitative research consisted of short semi-structured interviews with AltaMed patients from the sample who sought care for COVID-19 and were flagged as experiencing homelessness in the Electronic Health Record data.
 - 20 individuals were contacted for an interview, nine of whom confirmed having experienced housing instability (including homelessness).
 - Interview questions focused on patients' experience seeking care for COVID-19, diagnosis and follow-up care, ability to follow medical recommendations, and experience seeking assistance for housing needs.

FINDINGS

- The quantitative research found statistically significant differences in underlying health conditions and key demographics between persons experiencing homelessness who tested positive for COVID-19 and persons experiencing homelessness who tested negative for COVID-19
 - Persons experiencing homelessness who tested positive were more likely to have diabetes, heart conditions, and be overweight or obese.
 - Persons experiencing homelessness who tested positive were more likely to identify as Latino, more likely to speak Spanish, and more likely to have a partner.
- The qualitative interviews identified key themes that persons experiencing homelessness experienced during the pandemic.
 - A lack of independent housing resulted in less control and heightened fear of contracting COVID-19.
 - Persons experiencing homelessness left shared housing because of fears surrounding COVID-19.
 - Persons experiencing homelessness experienced challenges with isolation centers.
 - Persons experiencing homelessness experienced challenges accessing housing resources during the pandemic.



- The process of extracting EHR data from the AltaMed systems led to a better understanding of the challenges healthcare systems face when documenting social needs like homelessness.
 - Homelessness status can be captured in multiple fields of EHR records based on how a care provider documents a patient's housing status.
 - Homelessness flags can be outdated in EHR records.
 - How patient-facing staff understand the definition of homelessness can impact data quality, since homelessness flags may capture a range of housing needs.
 - The quantitative research found statistically significant differences in underlying health conditions and key demographics between persons experiencing homelessness and persons not experiencing homelessness in both comparison groups.
 - Persons experiencing homelessness were more likely to have underlying health conditions that include: cancer, chronic kidney disease, diabetes, respiratory illness, heart condition, obesity and substance abuse disorders.
 - Persons experiencing homelessness were more likely to be female.

NEXT STEPS

- This research demonstrates that there is a need to improve tracking methods used by healthcare systems to flag cases of homelessness or housing instability. Data integrity could be improved if efforts were taken to standardize tracking methods by using the same field to flag patients or streamlining the definitions used for social needs, like homelessness. Standardized tracking could improve patient follow up and care if patients with social needs are identified more reliably.
- Persons experiencing homelessness are more likely to have underlying health conditions that increase their vulnerability to severe cases of COVID-19, however interviews with these patients suggest that these individuals have faced challenges with accessing housing resources or maintaining stable housing during the pandemic. More research is needed regarding specific challenges faced by those impacted by the virus, which could be shared with housing service providers who can implement changes and improvements to increase access to their services.

ABOUT THE HOMELESSNESS POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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