

Homelessness and Hunger¹

Overview:

- People experiencing homelessness were much more likely than housed persons to experience food insecurity, particularly involuntary fasting and inability to afford food.
- Among the study sample, homeless women were more likely to experience food insecurity, while older people experiencing homelessness and individuals with higher incomes had less food insecurity.
- Employment was found to be a significant predictor among the social ties, with more time spent working related to decreased food insecurity in the study sample.

Study:

This study utilized data from the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients to better understand predictors of hunger among people experiencing homelessness, especially those experiencing chronic homelessness. From the Survey, researchers identified 2,898 individuals for their sample; these individuals were 18 years of age or older and lacked a permanent and adequate nighttime residence, or had a temporary residence or residence not intended for sleeping accommodations as of the survey. Their research aimed to identify where hunger falls among major unmet needs of people experiencing homelessness and to separate out the dimensions of food insecurity including level, source, cost, and quality of food consumed.

The researchers developed a differentiating hypothesis, predicting that highly individualized experiences with homelessness will impact likelihood of varied experiences with hunger. The researchers posited that those persons experiencing homelessness who had knowledge of nutrition, motivation for healthful eating, and means to purchase a sufficient quantity of food should have less hunger. They predicted that institutional engagement and social ties would decrease likelihood of hunger, individual deficits would increase likelihood of hunger, and demographic status and homelessness experiences would have mixed effects. The study differentiated between those experiencing transitional homelessness, episodic homelessness, and chronic homelessness

Findings:

The researchers in this study found that when asked “what are the things you need most now?”, survey respondents ranked “assistance getting food” sixth, with 15.8 percent choosing this option as

NVTAC Insights:

For HVRP staff members working with veterans experiencing homelessness, this study provides some insight into a contradiction regarding food insecurity you may encounter when talking to veterans coming into HVRP. While individuals do not report needing assistance with food as a high unmet need, when you dig into the details, you'll find that the specific dimensions of food insecurity start to take on much more meaning. For example, a veteran may say that he does not need help identifying food resources during the intake, but during the course of your work together, he may mention that he often skips meals (involuntary fasting) or doesn't eat enough food because of the cost (inability to afford food).

We can also learn from this study that individuals experiencing homelessness who work more over the course of their lifetime are less likely to experience food insecurity, so getting a job through HVRP sets a veteran up for a more secure relationship with food and better health. Your work to help veterans in HVRP get good jobs has an impact on their food security now and throughout their lifetime!

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an unmet need. This choice came far behind finding employment and securing or maintaining housing, which were ranked higher and chosen by over 40 percent of respondents. However, over 80 percent of respondents noted at least one form of food insecurity, and three-fifths of respondents noted they experienced inadequate food access, availability, and quality. The researchers found that people experiencing homelessness were much more likely to experience either involuntary fasting or inability to afford food than housed persons (nearly 40 percent each for homeless people in the last month, versus 5.5 percent and 10.1 percent for housed people in the last year).

¹ Lee, B., & Greif, M. (2008). Homelessness and Hunger. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 1, 3-19.