

Examining chronic disease prevalence in homeless populations in Athens-Clarke County, GA



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Background

Athens Wellbeing Project (AWP) is a community research organization which aims to provide longitudinal data on health, housing, education, civic vitality, and community safety to inform decision-making and improve quality of life for Athens' citizens. The objective of this research is to examine the prevalence of chronic health conditions in homeless households in Athens, Georgia.

Methods

Instrument. This research used the AWP 3.0 Survey which includes over 100 items to measure wellbeing.

Sampling. While most of the population was surveyed using a simple random sample of Athens households, homeless and transitional populations were purposefully selected into our sample.

Data collection. We partnered with local service providers to distribute surveys to individuals experiencing homelessness, as defined by the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act.

Analysis. All data was cleaned and coded for analysis. Descriptive statistics were generated using statistical software STATA. Prevalence of chronic conditions in the homeless population were calculated as a proportion of the sample of homeless households.

Interpretation. Recommendations presented here are reflective of the author's position and not that of Athens Wellbeing Project.

Chronic Condition	Prevalence in Homeless Households
Cancer	13%
Diabetes	21%
Hypertension	41%
Arthritis or rheumatism	20%
High cholesterol	15%
Asthma	17%
Heart disease	15%
Alcohol use disorder	9.4%
Opioid Use Disorder	3.5%
Other Drug Use Disorder	7%
Chronic Pain	22%
Obesity	9.4%
Depression	30.6%
Anxiety	37.6%
Other Mental Health Disorder	17.6%
None of these	13%

Results

As a result of outreach efforts with faith based and nonprofit organizations, the AWP 3.0 survey received responses from 85 (n=85) households or family units experiencing homelessness. Of this group, ages ranged from 21 to 65 years old, with a mean age of 47. The sample was 60.7% Black, 33.7% white, 8.9% Indian, 2.25% Latinx, and 7.7% other, including two or more races. Approximately 12% of the sample reported veteran status for someone in their household. Results for chronic disease prevalence can be found in the table.

Discussion

Key findings. Chronic health conditions are common among homeless households in Athens, Georgia. Only 13% of the homeless population report no chronic health conditions. The most prevalent conditions found were hypertension (41%), anxiety (37.6%), depression (30.6%), chronic pain (22%), and diabetes (21%). Several of the chronic health conditions reported in this population were more prevalent than in the overall sample of Athens households. Notably, diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease were higher among homeless households than the overall sample. Prevalence of heart disease is especially elevated in the homeless population at 15%, compared to 6% in the overall sample. Rates of depression and anxiety were similar in the homeless sample and overall sample.

Limitations. One of the limitations of this research is the non- random sampling method. Because the homeless population is difficult to count, randomize, and reach, voluntary convenience samples were collected through local service providers. As such, the sample of homeless individuals may not be representative of the Athens homeless population, and the findings cannot be generalized to other populations.

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Appendix A. Partner Organizations

We partnered with Athens Area Homeless Shelter, Family Promise of Athens, Sparrow's Nest, Bigger Vision, Acceptance Recovery Center, Project Safe, Athens Resource Center for Hope, Downtown Ministries, Salvation Army, the Backpack Project, Advantage Behavioral Health Systems, and the Athens Homeless Coalition to distribute surveys to homeless households. Some organizations allowed us to visit & distribute surveys in person. Some organizations had us drop off paper surveys and return envelopes for clients to fill out. The majority of survey data comes from organizations that we visited to survey.

Appendix B. McKinney-Vento Definition

We used the definition of homelessness created by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. According to this definition, a person is homeless if they lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, or if their primary nighttime residence is a temporary shelter, transitional housing, or any place that is not meant for human habitation.

Appendix C. Comparison of Chronic Disease Prevalence in Homeless Households and Overall Athens Households

Chronic Condition	Prevalence in Homeless Households	Prevalence in all Athens Households
Cancer	13%	10%
Diabetes	21%	13.3%
Hypertension	41%	31%
Arthritis or rheumatism	20%	14%
High cholesterol	15%	22%
Asthma	17%	19%
Heart disease	15%	6%
AUD or SUD	~9.4%	6.5%
Chronic Pain	22%	13.2%
Obesity	9.4%	19%
Depression	30.6%	32%
Anxiety	37.6%	38%
Other Mental Health Disorder	17.6%	9%
None of these	13%	22%

Appendix D. Additional Limitations

AUD and SUD. Because we used the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness, we wanted to include households in "transitional" housing, which can include recovery homes for substance use or alcohol use disorders. We visited Athens Resource Center for Hope (ARCH) and distributed surveys to the residents of the AUD/SUD program. Because we sampled a group from this program, it is very likely that alcohol use (AUD) and substance use disorders (SUD) are overrepresented in our sample of homeless households.

Comparison to overall sample. The table listed in Appendix C. contains prevalence data for homeless households (n=85) and the overall sample of Athens households (n=3,997). There were no comparative analyses done on these data to determine whether differences were statistically significant. This is descriptive data.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Homelessness is a health risk, as a person who is unsheltered or living in close proximity to others is at an increased risk of communicable diseases and physical dangers. When an individual experiencing homelessness has a chronic condition, it can be difficult to adopt the lifestyle changes needed to be healthy. Athens-Clarke County homeless service providers should be aware of chronic health conditions in their client populations and offer relevant education and interventions when possible. Local policy and funding should continue to support homeless service providers. Additional research is needed to determine the best methods of supporting health in homeless populations.