



Acknowledging the Link Between Trauma & Homelessness November 2023

It's important to remember that homelessness is a symptom of an infinite number of combinations of factors. However, as we acknowledge Veteran's Day in November, we're focusing on how trauma and lived experience can both influence and exacerbate the symptom of homelessness.

“Trauma” is the combination and result of experiencing life-threatening and/or life-altering events. While the most common example of the overlap between trauma and homelessness are combat veterans experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), PTSD is also commonly experienced by survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, and other forms of abuse.

Even without the complicating external factors that accompany being unhoused, experiencing housing insecurity in and of itself is traumatic. It does not take much looking to find literature on trauma incurred while unhoused.

Both Tischler, et al., (2009) and Goodman et al., (1991) suggest that the state of being homeless is a trauma in itself:

- Trauma incurred through loss of stable housing, poor conditions of shelter life, increased threat to personal health, etc., may lead to social disaffiliation, learned helplessness, and demoralization.
- This trauma may also intensify a lack of trust in others, as well as depression and shame (Dice, 2012)

Additionally, people within historically marginalized populations experience higher levels of trauma. “Homelessness as trauma: a theoretical analysis exploring treatment of symptoms of grief and loss in single African-American homeless women” (2012) echoed previous research:

- “When an individual becomes homeless, they are immediately at higher risk of being victimized through violent and non-violent crimes, than other housed populations” (Burt, 2001; Lee, 2005; Perron, et al., 2008).
- “Homeless women are two to four times more likely to have been physically or sexually assaulted as adults compared to housed women” (Perron, et al., 2008).

While this all may feel heavy, there is good news—national Point in Time (PIT) data shows that veteran homelessness has decreased by more than 55% since 2010, as reported by the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH). Similarly, local PIT data does not necessarily indicate widespread veteran homelessness or mental health disorders in our unhoused community. Despite this, we want to elevate mental health and trauma-informed care in the discussion around homelessness in our Continuum of Care (CoC).

Due to the multiple layers of trauma that typically manifest in folx who are experiencing homelessness, we implement and advocate for trauma-informed care within our CoC which includes understanding the trauma that results from housing insecurity and its effects, creating safe physical and emotional spaces for folx, supporting people's choice and control.

As the largest homelessness research library in the world, Homeless Hub draws on data from numerous studies to show, among other positive indicators, that implementing trauma-informed care:

- Has better outcomes than “treatment as usual” (Cocozza et al., 2005; Morrissey and Ellis, 2005; Kammerer et al., n.d.)
- Leads to better self-esteem, improved relationships, and increased safety in children. (Finkelstein et al., 2005; Noether et al., 2007)
- Generally does not cost more than standard programming (Domino et al., 2005)

Transparently, one of our goals in writing our blog posts is to humanize our unhoused neighbors. Too often, unhoused folx are demonized and blamed for their own circumstances. Our hope in discussing the overlap of circumstances like mental illness and racial disparities in housing access, we can underscore the point that most people are just a few unexpected incidents away from facing homelessness themselves.

If you or a neighbor are facing housing instability or feel that your rights to housing have been violated, please connect with MACCH through our Access Points and CoC organizations in our community. We have a network of resources to prevent individuals and families from facing housing insecurity and gain access to safe, quality housing. We would like our neighbors and community to know they are not alone. Everyone's circumstances are unique, MACCH and its CoC partners are committed to addressing each of our neighbors' needs.

Please add us on [Facebook @MACCHOMAHA](#) and [X at @MACCH_OMA](#) to stay connected and engage in our community's collective response to housing insecurity in Douglas, Sarpy, and Pottawattamie Counties.

Sources:

<https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/who-experiences-homelessness/veterans/>

<https://housingmatterssc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/PTSD-and-Homelessness.pdf>

<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1931&context=theses>

<https://homelesshub.ca/resource/trauma-informed-care-what-do-we-know>