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Causes of Homelessness among the Unsheltered Population in Las Vegas, U.S.

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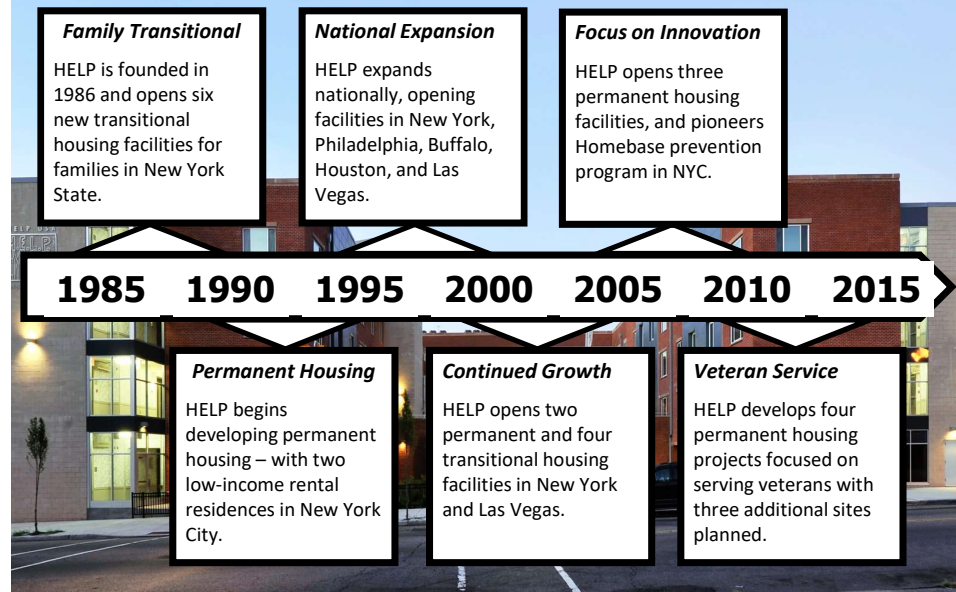
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OVERVIEW ────────────────────────

HELP USA is a national housing and homeless services organization. We opened our first family shelter in New York City in 1986 and have grown to include over 65 programs and residences across five U.S. states. Our annual operating budget is over $140M and we employ more than 1,200 people. We have 143 units of transitional housing and 57 units of permanent housing for low-income single adults in Las Vegas.

HELP HISTORY ────────────────────────

Family Transitional

HELP is founded in 1986 and opens six new transitional housing facilities for families in New York State.

National Expansion

HELP expands nationally, opening facilities in New York, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Houston, and Las Vegas.

Focus on Innovation

HELP opens three permanent housing facilities, and pioneers Homebase prevention program in NYC.

1985   1990   1995   2000   2005   2010   2015

Permanent Housing

HELP begins developing permanent housing – with two low-income rental residences in New York City.

Continued Growth

HELP opens two permanent and four transitional housing facilities in New York and Las Vegas.

Veteran Service

HELP develops four permanent housing projects focused on serving veterans with three additional sites planned.

Las Vegas in popular culture

Unsheltered Homelessness in U.S. Western States

Many people who are homeless in the five U.S. Western States of California, Arizona, Washington Oregon, and Nevada are unsheltered.

"States in the West reported some of the highest percentages of all people experiencing homelessness who were counted in unsheltered locations."

Homelessness increased by 42% in California from 2014 to 2020, yet declined nationally by 9% during that period (Streeter, 2022)

2022 AHAR Report to Congress

Rental unaffordability: major risk factor of homelessness

- Nationally, the number of affordable rental units per 100 poor rental households declined from **42** in the late 1990s to **33** by 2021 (NLICH, 2022)
- National rental housing shortage increased from **2** to **7 million** from the 1980s to 2021(NLICH,2022)

Region	Affordable rental units per 100 poor rental households
U.S.	33
west*	30
Nevada	18
Las Vegas	14

* = 2015 (Harvard, 2021)

Factors of "extreme poverty" and rental crisis in Las Vegas: "cost burden", job precarity and the "financialization" of the rental market

- Cost burden:
  - 75% of renter households with incomes 80% or less than Area Median Income (AMI) pay more than 30% on rent
  - 40% of this group pays more than half of their income on rent (NLIHC, 2020; Seymour and Akers, 2021)

- Job precarity:
  - 28% of workers are "precarious[ly] employed" in the dominant hospitality and leisure sector (Seymore and Akers, 2021)
  - These jobs do not provide traditional employment protections but are subject to stiff competition by migrant workers (Borchard, 1997; Seymore and Akers, 2021)
  - Unemployment rate is consistently higher than the national average (6.0% vs 3.5% in April) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.)

"Extreme Poverty" continued

- "Financialization" of the rental market
  - Las Vegas had the highest "Great Recession" foreclosure rate in the country (12% at the peak of the crisis), which was concentrated in Black and Latino communities (Bocian et al, 2010; Maycock and Malacrida, 2018; Seymour and Akers, 2022; Wargo, 2010)
  - Housing ownership declined and continues to trail the national average (54% vs 64%) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021; Schuetz, 2019)
  - Private investors also began seizing foreclosed properties and converting them into market-rate rental units (Andrews & Sisson, 2018; Semuels, 2019; Seymour & Akers, 2021)
  - These events spiked rental prices which reduced access to housing for poorer renters and increased evictions

The problem of "unsheltered" homelessness

- **Las Vegas:** the share of unsheltered to total number of persons experiencing homelessness increased from 30% in 2010 to 66% in 2020, then decreased to 51% of the total (5,645) (City of Las Vegas, 2023; HUD, 2022)
- Housing and supply side constraints correlated with unsheltered homelessness in the west (Batko et al, 2019)
  - higher rents *and* lower rental unit vacancy rates
  - lower numbers of affordable rental units per 100 extremely low-income households
  - lower bed capacities in shelter systems
    - undermines access for the single homeless population, which comprise 90% of homeless population (Cohen et al, 2019; Schuetz & Ring, 2021)

Summarizing trends in Las Vegas

- Staggering shortages of affordable rental units for the poorest individuals and families

- Scarce federal rental subsidies

- High risks, among the city's working poor, to job insecurity and unemployment

- Limited willingness to serve the unsheltered homeless

Research Design and Questions

Research Questions and Frame

Questions

- What are the major causes of homelessness in Las Vegas?

- What are the pathways into homelessness?
  - Places of origin
  - Types of residences before homelessness
  - Experiences in institutions (e.g., incarceration)

Frame

- Structural drivers (e.g., rent burden, job precarity)

- Bi-directional risks factors
  - Substance use problems
  - Health burdens

- Adverse childhood experiences (ACE)

Survey Design

Amalgamating federal and local methods

- HUD's "combined" "public places" and "service-based" method: focuses on surveying unsheltered populations in areas where non-shelter organizations serve persons experiencing homeless (HUD, 2008:45-50).
  - **"Screener"** questions:
    - identify persons whose circumstances meet the federal definition of homelessness
    - prevent duplicated counts
  - **Major questions**:
    - causes of homelessness
    - Disabilities
    - substance abuse
    - health related issues
- recommends a "**brief**" "**training** for all volunteers…immediately before the count" (HUD, 2008:31)

(continued)

San Jose survey (Smith and Castaneda Tinoco, 2019)

- used HUDs questions, but added two more on mental health
- volunteers underwent a rigorous two month research methods training

Calgary Homeless Foundation's Rehousing Triage and Assessment Survey (RTAS) (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009)

- Demographics
- housing & homelessness histories
- physical & mental health burdens
- substance use problems
- recommended assigning a planning committee to identify volunteers to conduct the survey and map out the area beforehand

(continued)

- case study analysis on formerly homeless persons in New York with serious mental illnesses and substance abuse histories (Padgett et al, 2012: 421)

  - examined "adverse life events" to understand the "cumulative influence" of traumas on entering homelessness

HELP USA Las Vegas Courtyard Survey

- contained an "informed consent" clause and "screeners"
- Demographics
- family histories & adverse childhood experiences
- primary causes of homelessness
- Institutionalization
- substance use problems
- mental health burdens

Administering the Survey

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Administrators and Participants

Survey Teams

- Las Vegas Neighborhood Services Department

- Local community-based organizations

- HELP USA

Participants at a glance

- The team administered 400 administered surveys.

- 360 (90%)were completed *and* useable for analysis

- We disqualified 40 surveys in cases where respondents:
  - did not meet the federal definition of homelessness (qualifier questions)
  - selected "refuse to answer" in several fields *or*
  - did not answer questions (missing data).

Key similarities and differences between HELP USA and PIT Survey (HHH, 2022)

Similarities

- Single adult homeless persons
  - 90%, HHH 2022
  - 89.43%, HELP 2023
- Mental health burdens
  - 33%, HHH, 2022
  - 32.2% HELP 2023
- Domestic violence experience
  - 3%, HHH, 2022
  - 1.6% our survey

Differences

- adults (over 24)
  - 88%, (children = 6%), HHH 2022
  - 98.89% (average age = 50.1) HELP 2023
- Unsheltered
  - 51%, HHH 2022
  - 53% (Courtyard) + 14% (another unsheltered location), HELP 2023
    - 25% (emergency shelter
    - 8% (another location)

Demographics

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Age, household status, primary language, and place of origin

	Total
Age	50.097
Gender	
female	20.83%
male	78.33%
transgender	0.28%
gender non-conforming	0.28%
did not identify with any of the above	0.28%
household status	
individual	89.42%
family	10.58%
primary language	
English	86.67%
Spanish	10.28%
Other	3.06%
place of origin (region)	
(1) West (outside Nevada)	30.97%
(2) Midwest	16.48%
(3) Nevada	13.92%
(4) Outside US	12.78%
(5) Northeast	12.22%
(6) Southwest	7.10%
(7)Southeast	5.68%
(1) and (4)	0.57%

Race, education veteran status, employment status

race & ethnicity

White (non-Hispanic)	32.29%
Black or African-American	31.73%
Latinx	24.65%
Asian or Pacific Islander	5.95%
Multiple races	4.53%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.85%

education

did not complete high school	27.58%
high school	32.87%
some college	23.40%
graduated from college	11.98%
some graduate school	2.23%
completed graduate school	1.95%

veterans	7.78%

employment status

employed	10.83%
unemployed and	
looking for work	55.00%

Survey Measures

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(1) primary drivers of homelessness

primary cause	n	%
unemployment	144	40.00%
family problems (discord or loss/death of household member)	47	13.10%
health problems (physical, mental and substance related)	50	13.90%
loss of housing (foreclosure, eviction, burned down, affordability)	41	11.40%
loss of public assistance or identification documents	13	3.60%
relocation/deportation/immigration/seeking asylum	14	3.90%
released from institution	12	3.30%
personal issues	9	2.50%
violence	9	2.50%
other or refused to answer	21	5.80%
total	**360**	**100.00%**

(2) health and substance use problems

- a physical disability (n=118; 32.8%)

- abused drugs or alcohol (n=156; 43.3%)

- used injection drugs (n=25 6.9%)

- received treatment for alcohol or drug abuse (n=83; 23.1%)

- ever experienced psychotic symptoms, such as hallucinations or delusions (n=54; 14.7%)

- received treatment for mental health issues (n=116; 32.2%)

- been hospitalized for mental health reasons against their will (n=50; 13.9%)

(3) adverse childhood experiences (ACE) and (4) incarceration

- had ever failed a grade or dropped out of school (n=133; 36.9%)

- grew up while one or both parents experienced unemployment (n=115; 31.9%)

- had ever been in the foster care system (n=53; 14.7%)

- were abandoned by one or both parents (n=88; 24.4%)

- experienced the death of a mother or stepmother (n=46; 12.8%)

- experienced the death of a father or stepfather (n=56; 15.6%)

- were ever physically abused by a parent or guardian (n=82; 22.8%)

- ever been incarcerated in a jail or prison (n=229; 63.6%)

Latent Class Analysis (LCA)

- ## What is LCA?
  - a probabilistic model that identifies different groups of people, or "classes", in a sample based on patterns of individual responses to multiple "categorical" questions (Tsai et al, 2013; Weller et al, 2020)

- ## "observed" categories vs "latent" "classes":
  - Survey responses are "observed" measures (each respondent has answered each question that was directly posed to them)

  - "classes" represent "unobserved" – or, "latent – measures because they arise from statistically significant combinations of the "observed" measures (B.O. Muthen & L.K Muthen, 2000; Wolke et al., 2013; Weller et al, 2020)

- ## Objective:' -
  - identify **specific patterns – "classes"** - of the **observed measures** associated with entering homelessness in Las Vegas, where our observed measures include all variables in the previous 3 slides

Findings

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Three Latent Class Solution

Class 1 (n=239; 66%): *the highest likelihood of entering homelessness due to unemployment with the least likelihood of encountering adverse experiences during childhood, or health and substance use problems before entering homelessness.* We call this class ***unemployment***.

Class 2 respondents (n=40; 11%): *the highest likelihood of entering homelessness due to family problems and violence, with the highest likelihood of enduring multiple adverse childhood experiences **and incarceration***. We call this class ***family problems, violence, disabilities, and multiple adverse childhood experiences.***

Class 3 (n=81;23%): *the highest likelihood of entering homelessness due to health problems and the loss of housing (due to external forces; e.g. eviction) with the highest likelihood of substance use and mental health problems*. We call this class ***health and substance use problems with histories of abandonment and paternal death***.

Study measures by latent class

primary cause homelessness

health and substance use measures by class
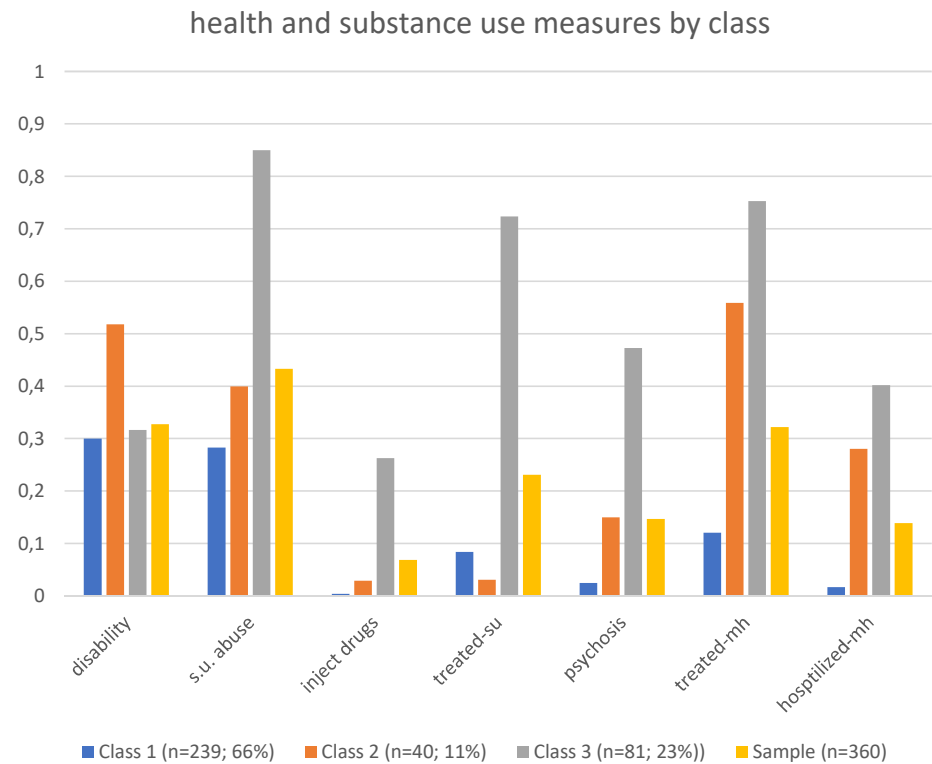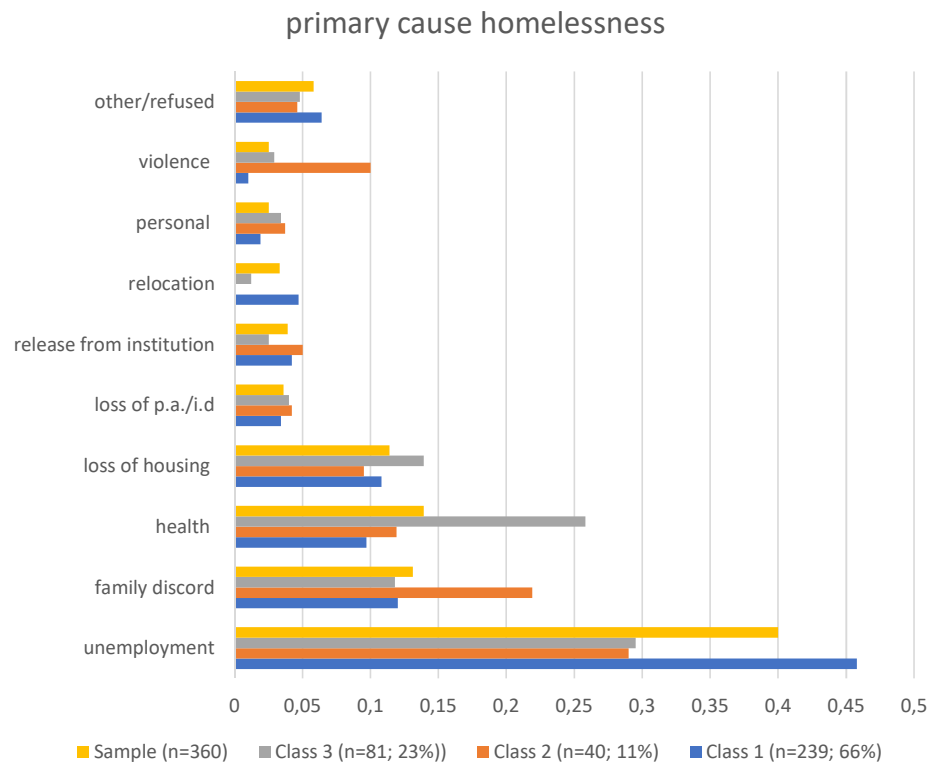
Study measures by latent class (continued)

incarceration rate by class

adverse childhood experiences ACEs by class
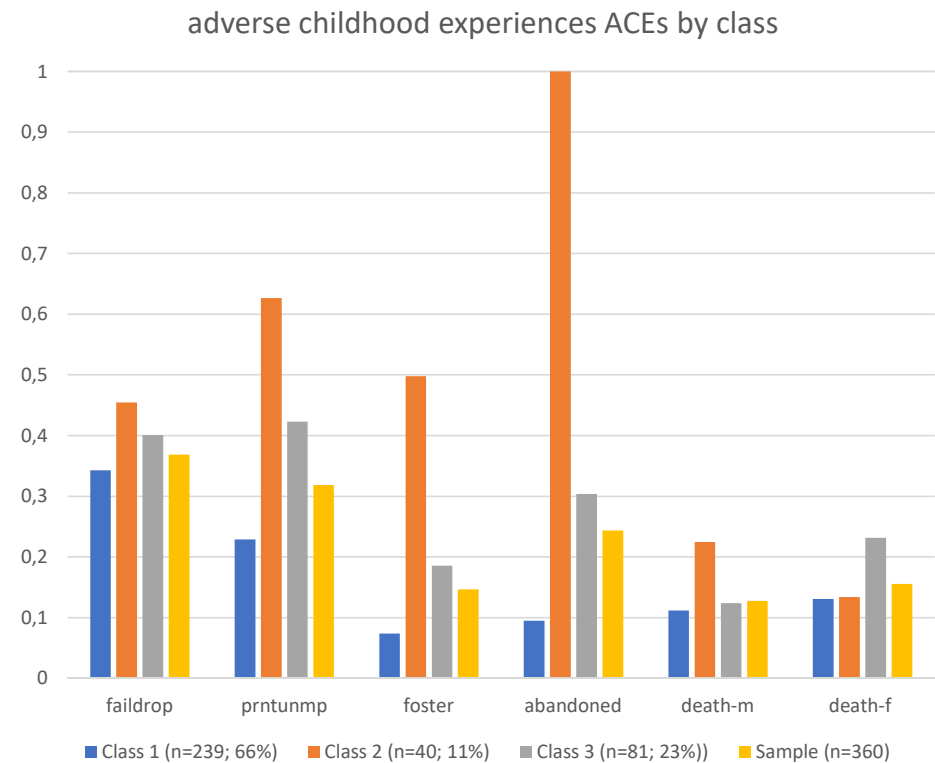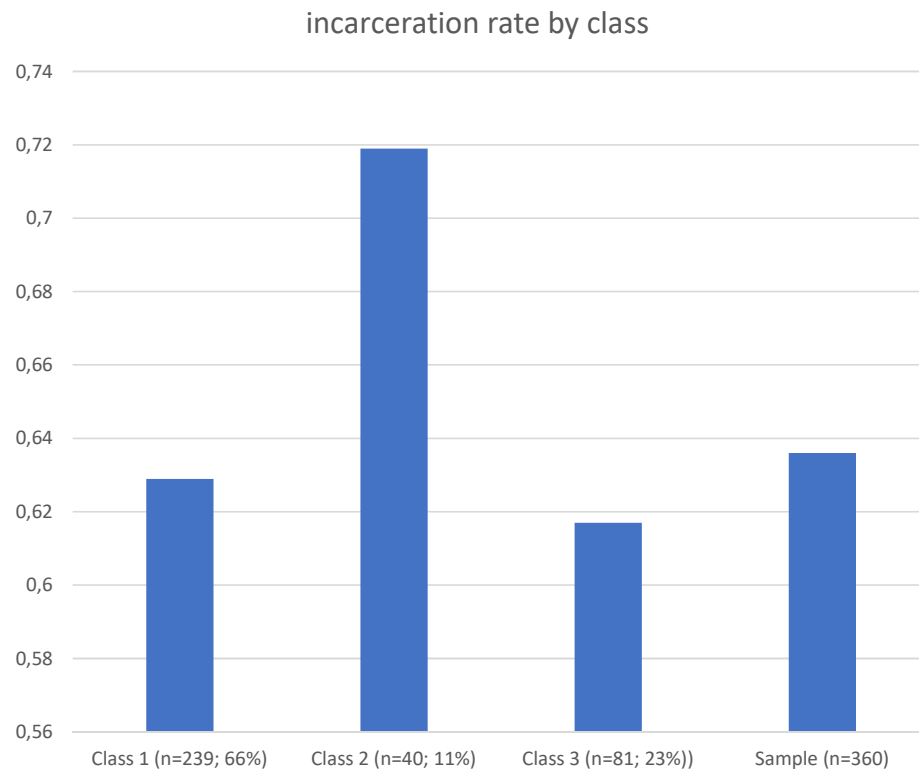
Significant demographic characteristics by class

Gender	Unemployment (class 1)	Family conflict & multiple ACEs (class 2)	Health & substance use burdens/abandonment and paternal death (class 3)	Sample
female	17.57%	**37.5%***	22.22%	20.83%
race & ethnicity				
White (non-Hispanic)	27.12%	**43.24%***	**42.5%**	32.29%
Latinx	28.39%	**10.81%***	20.00%	24.65%
primary language				
Spanish	12.97%	5.00%	**4.94***	10.28%
place of origin (region)				
Outside US	17.37%	5.26%	**5.13^**	12.78%
region before homelessness				
Clarke County	68.62%	62.50%	**51.85^**	64.17%
Nevada (outside CC)	2.51%	5.00%	2.47%	2.78%
out of State	28.87%	32.50%	**45.68%***	33.06%
accommodation before homelessness				
staying w friends	9.21%	**22.50%***	7.41%	10.28%

* = p<0.05; ^ = p<0.01

Structural factors most prominently caused homelessness

- Class 1 (66%) "Unemployment" implies that interplay between multiple structural risk factors induces homelessness:
  - lack of formal benefits associated with low-skilled jobs
  - class 1 was more likely to hail from immigrant and Latinx communities that had lived in Clarke Country immediately before entering homelessness -- plausible link to the Great Recession's higher foreclosure rates among minority communities
  - unemployment amid a vast shortage of affordable rental units can prevent one from making a housing payment or lead to chronic unemployment

Housing instability was correlated with health and substance use histories

- Class 3 (23%) "health and substance use with histories of abandonment and paternal death" were also more likely to report:
    - the loss of housing caused homelessness
    - they had lived in another US state immediately before entering homelessness
    - they had grown up in the United States itself
- It is, therefore, possible that conditions of housing instability that led to homelessness among this group occurred in another state and influenced their migration.
- The influx of people from LA and Orange Country to Nevada from 2000 to 2010 accounted for 56% of the state's in-migration during those years but "only wealthier people" were able to comfortably secure housing (Seymore & Akers, 2021).

Trauma induced homelessness is concentrated among women

- Class 2 (11%) "***family problems, violence, disabilities, and multiple adverse childhood experiences***" were also more likely
  - To be female
  - To have lived with friends immediately before entering homelessness

- This potentially indicates that these respondents' experiences of traumas (childhood abuse) and poverty (parental unemployment) in childhood was linked to lack of social support in adulthood preceding or associated with becoming homeless (Herman et al, 1997; Shelton et al, 2009; Lieu et al, 2021)

Recommendations

- focus on/implement employment and job placement services
  - may help people who became homeless due, primarily, to unemployment (class 1) to secure and retain housing
- Increase the number of transitional housing sites in the city
  - Model should cater to the single adult homeless population and provide employment and job placement, housing placement, and harm reduction-based substance abuse services.
  - Case management services should also link clients to benefits and healthcare services.
  - Services can address the mental health, substance use, and trauma that afflict over one-third of this surveyed population (classes 2 and 3)
- fund trauma-informed mental health care models
- reduce the deficit in affordable rental units for the poorest renters
  - address the volatility of the local housing market
  - increase housing ownership rates, particularly among members of the Black and Latinx communities
  - reduce the cost burden of poor renters
    - enabling multi-year leases (with pre-determined annual rent increases)
    - implement tenant protection policies (e.g., landlord mediations to prevent evictions)