

Discrimination and Violence Against People Experiencing Homelessness in Los Angeles County:

Findings from The Periodic Assessment of Trajectories of Housing, Homelessness, and Health Study (PATHS)¹

This study investigates the prevalence of discrimination and violence against persons experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County (LAC) from April-July 2023. Los Angeles is home to 11% of the nation's unhoused population, and over 20% of the population experiencing unsheltered or chronic homelessness. Discrimination and violence create traumatic experiences which complicate the often challenging physical and mental health conditions faced by persons experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles.

Full paper can be found: [here](#)

PATHS is funded by the Hilton Foundation's support of
[HPRI's Research Agenda](#)

With support from the [UCLA Initiative to Study Hate](#)

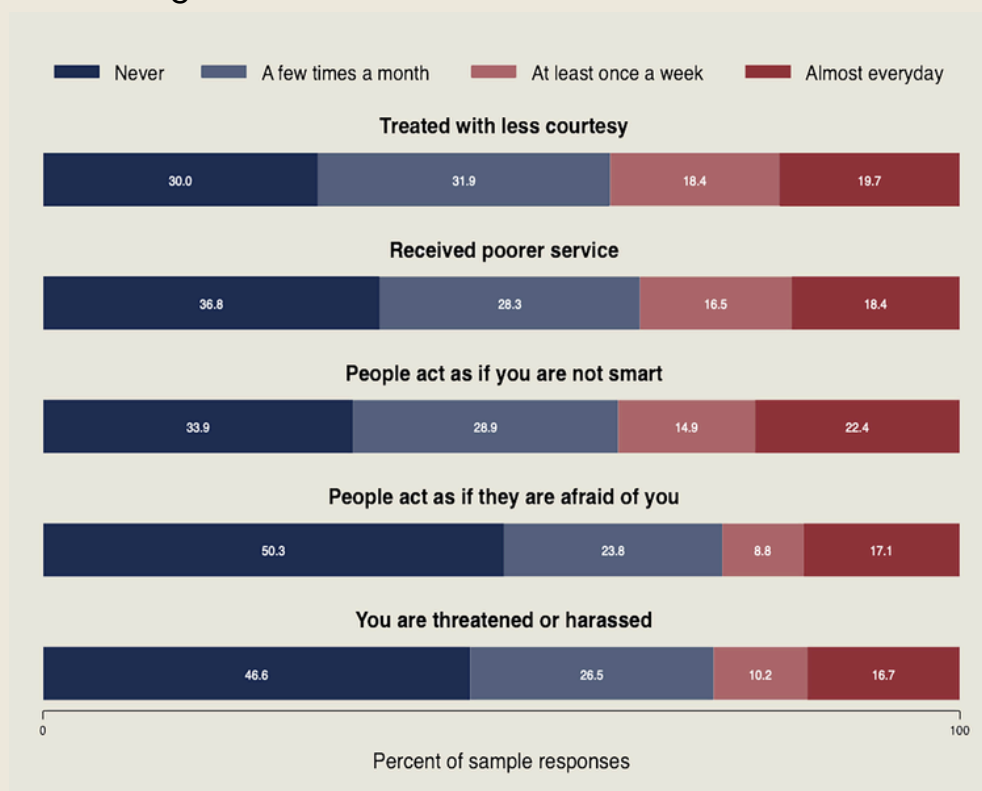
¹ The findings from PATHS on encampment sweeps and housing trajectories can be found: [here](#)

Methods

The study utilized mobile devices to survey 332 persons experiencing homelessness in LA County from April to July 2023 regarding their experiences with discrimination, physical violence, and sexual violence as part of a larger study known as The Periodic Assessment of Trajectories of Housing, Homelessness, and Health Study (PATHS). The team analyzed data using regression models to assess the associations between demographic characteristics [race/ethnicity, sexual identity/orientation, age], health [mental illness, substance misuse, physical ailments], and housing with experiences of discrimination and violence.

Key Results

- 31.8% of respondents experienced daily discrimination, with 53.9% reporting weekly discrimination. These weekly rates are comparable to lifetime rates of discrimination observed in prior studies of race/ethnic and gender minorities
- 16.0% experienced physical violence, and 7.5% experienced sexual violence in the past month, which are many times higher than annual rates experienced by the general U.S. population.
- Almost half of those experiencing discrimination believed their housing situation was the primary reason.
- Discrimination was found to be statistically associated with being unsheltered, weekly illicit drug use, and psychological distress.
- Physical violence was found to be statistically associated with being sheltered, unsheltered outdoors, physical health conditions, and psychological distress.
- Sexual violence was found to be statistically associated with non-male gender and being unsheltered outdoors.



The findings show high levels of discrimination and violence against persons experiencing homelessness, especially those unsheltered outdoors. Psychological distress, substance use, and physical health conditions increase vulnerability. Strategies to counter stigma and provide trauma-informed services are crucial, but are frequently underfunded or scarce relative to the level of need. Housing First programs and tailored supportive services for survivors of violence are essential in addressing experiences of discrimination and/or violence.

Limitations

The study's cross-sectional design limits causal inference. This study used mobile phones to inquire about experiences among persons experiencing homelessness, however, this may exclude some people who do not have consistent access to mobile devices. It is estimated, however, that about 94% of people experiencing homelessness in LA County have mobile phones, which is about the same as the general US population. Language is another limitation that may affect data representation, as the survey was only available in English and Spanish. Response rates were moderate as samples were restricted to participants who responded to the monthly survey within a 3-month span with a response rate of 50%, and potential underreporting due to privacy concerns.

Policy Implications

Housing First Approach: Implementing and expanding Housing First initiatives, which prioritize providing immediate and permanent housing to persons experiencing homelessness without preconditions like sobriety or treatment compliance. This approach has been shown to improve stability and reduce vulnerability to violence among persons experiencing homelessness.

Enhance Supportive Services: Increasing funding and access to supportive services such as mental health care, trauma-informed care, and substance use treatment tailored to the needs of persons experiencing homelessness. This would help address health issues and reduce factors associated with discrimination and violence.

Security and Safety Measures: Enhancing security measures in shelters and other housing facilities to protect persons experiencing homelessness from physical and sexual violence. This includes training staff in de-escalation techniques.

Anti-Discrimination Policies: Implementing and enforcing anti-discrimination policies that protect persons experiencing homelessness from discriminatory practices based on housing status, race/ethnicity, gender, and other factors. This could involve legal protections and training for service providers/law enforcement.

Collaboration of Services: Improving coordination among health, housing, and social service agencies to ensure seamless services to persons experiencing homelessness. This integrated approach can address multiple needs simultaneously and improve programs.

Equity Implications

Structural Inequities: Research has made clear that racial discrimination contributes to homelessness. Yet self-report among our sample of people experiencing homelessness found that housing status rather than race was associated with violence and discrimination. This underscores the need to address root causes to prevent homelessness faced by marginalized communities that ultimately results in higher rates of victimization.

Health Equity: Persons experiencing homelessness often experience disproportionately higher rates of physical and mental health issues, and early onset of age-related conditions. Studies of housed populations have tied the early onset of aging to chronic exposure to stress and discrimination. This study documents levels of discrimination and stress exposure several higher than those reported by minoritized populations in housing samples. Policies should prioritize equitable access to healthcare services that are culturally competent and tailored to the specific needs of persons experiencing homelessness such as trauma-informed care.

Legal Protections: Ensuring legal protections against discrimination based on housing status promotes equity. This includes enforcing fair housing laws and creating policies that protect the rights of persons experiencing homelessness in employment, education, and public services.

Data Inclusivity: Collecting disaggregated data by race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other relevant factors is crucial. This helps identify disparities within the population experiencing homelessness and address specific equity concerns.

Conclusion

Addressing discrimination and violence is essential for improving the health and well-being of persons experiencing homelessness. While finding housing is a challenge in and of itself, discrimination and violence make experiences of homelessness even more difficult and damaging to individuals' health and wellbeing. These findings highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions and supportive services that provide dignity, autonomy, and healing to those experiencing homelessness. Future research will assess the role of higher levels of exposure to discrimination and violence in driving the early onset of age-related conditions among people experiencing homelessness.