



**We are
Called**

TO HEAL. TO UNITE. TO JUSTICE.

Team Reflection

No. 24 Housing Instability

In the Fall of 2020, amid the coronavirus upheaval, Laura Tucker left no rock unturned to find students who did not return to school. When she accompanied sheriff's deputies to a wooded encampment near Tampa, FL, she found a 7th grade boy living with his mother. One by one, Ms. Tucker and her team of school social workers found 90% of the 7,000 missing students at the time CBS's 60-Minutes featured their arduous, yet inspiring efforts. [24.1]

Housing instability arose as a leading plight has been exposed and exacerbated by the prolonged pandemic. Without a pinpoint definition, housing instability captures a continuum between homelessness and stable, secure housing. It manifests in many forms, such as trouble paying rent, overcrowding, frequent moves, staying with relatives, or spending the bulk of household income on housing. The latter refers to a cost burden exceeding 30% of total income covering housing, and severely burdened if this increases to 50% of household income. [24.2] Close to half of all renters (47.5%) are cost burdened. [24.3] Black Americans comprise 40% of housing-insecure individuals and Hispanic Americans 20%. [4] Families headed by women account for one-third of the homeless population. [24.5]

Housing instability has a particularly painful impact on youth. Among homeless youth, 20-40% identify as LGBTQ, and among them, Black and Native American youth are disproportionately represented. A study of LGBTQ youth in the U.S. found them 2.2-times more likely to report homelessness. [24.6]

These challenges pose significant health risks. Youth experience generally poorer health, increased asthma and lifetime risk of depression, as well as possible developmental delays. Adults can experience significantly higher rates of mental health problems, and higher prevalence of HIV, substance abuse, tuberculosis, and other chronic conditions. With instable housing, individuals experience less connection to healthcare resources. This leads to a greater likelihood of compromised overall health and enables diseases to advance into latent phases that are more difficult to treat. Public policy can complicate matters with the criminalization of homelessness. [24.7]

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The search to call a place home goes back before biblical times. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the much beloved Psalm 23 speaks of the shepherd's goodness leading the flock from green pastures to dwell in the house of the Lord (23:6). Jesus' parents could not find safe housing in Bethlehem just as Mary was ready to give birth. And many take comfort in John's Gospel where Jesus assures his followers that in God's house there are many dwelling places (Jn 14:1–7).

More than any before him, Pope Francis has shown special affection to homeless individuals. He spent his 80th birthday dining with homeless people he invited inside the Vatican. He made unannounced visits to a free clinic administering COVID-19 vaccinations to homeless individuals. He has provided a free laundromat for Rome's housing insecure population, donated an ambulance to aid the homeless, and converted a former palace just beyond the walls of St. Peter's Square into a guest house for the poor and housing insecure, among countless other acts of charity.

Here in the U.S., a parish in Chicago provides a mailbox and mailing address for housing insecure job seekers. Health systems, too, are addressing the challenges housing insecurity presents with substantial community investment. CommonSpirit and Bon Secours Mercy Health, for example have pledged millions of dollars to address housing insecurity in communities such as Sacramento, Stockton, and Baltimore. Such deep investments not only reflect a Catholic commitment of integral human development, they also represent how a health system, as an anchor institution, can impact substantial change for the health of communities and vulnerable populations. [24.8]

Consider

- When I pass by tents under a viaduct or an individual pushing a rusty grocery cart overflowing with stuffed plastic bags, what reaction do I notice first welling up within me? What biases, or social narratives might I need to overcome to embrace housing-insecure individuals as freely as Pope Francis?
- What does my hospital and health system do to better the experience of housing insecurity in the community?

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Let us pray together

*O Lord, to whom no one is a stranger
and from whose help no one is ever distant,
look with compassion on those without a place to live;
we pray you restore them to a home of their own,
and give us a kind heart to help the homeless in their need.
We ask this in your holy and eternal name, AMEN.*

Adapted from Catholic Charities USA, Shelter the Homeless [prayer resource](#).

[24.1] CBS, “60-Minutes,” November 22, 2020. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/public-school-enrollment-coronavirus-pandemic-60-minutes-2020-11-22/>

[24.2] <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-health/interventions-resources/housing-instability>

[24.3] Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. The State of the Nation’s Housing, 2018. http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Harvard_JCHS_State_of_the_Nations_Housing_2018.pdf

[24.4] The National Alliance to End Homelessness. <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/what-causes-homelessness/inequality/>

[24.5] Hayashi, S. 2016. How Health and Homelessness are Connected—Medically. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/01/how-health-and-homelessness-are-connectedmedically/458871/>

[24.6] University of Chicago, Chapin Hall: <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/VoYC-LGBTQ-Brief-FINAL.pdf>; See also: <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/lgbtq-youth/homelessness>

[24.7] <https://www.cdc.gov/php/publications/topic/resources/resources-homelessness.html>

[24.8] <https://www.chausa.org/publications/catholic-health-world/archives/issues/september-15-2019/bonsecours-mercy-dignity-health-advance-affordable-housing-initiatives>

Additional Background Information

Dignity Health Press Center: <https://www.dignityhealth.org/sacramento/about-us/press-center/08-09-2018-dignity-health-announces-investment-in-the-city-of-sacramentos-homeless-initiative>;

See also:

1. <https://buildhealthyplaces.org/sharing-knowledge/blogs/news/press-release-new-dignity-health-investment-health-equity/>
2. <https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/article/september-october-2019/boundless-collaboration-a-philosophy-for-sustainable-and-stabilizing-housing-investment-strategy>