

Health Care Cost Matters for Homeless People: An Example of Costing Mental Health and Addiction Services in Homeless Shelters in Canada

What you need to know

Research has shown that homeless people suffer from high rates of physical and mental illness, substance use and addictions. Yet, even with universal health insurance, homeless people face barriers to accessing health care and social services to meet their needs. While there has been increasing interest in meeting the health needs of shelter users, there have been very few studies over the last ten years that describe the types of care needed

or costs of programs that service these needs. The data currently gathered by shelters to determine their budgets does not include the direct and indirect health care related costs. This has left many homeless shelters in a financial deficit. Additionally, because homeless shelters are municipally funded and health care is provincially funded, there is confusion about which level of government should be responsible for paying for these services.



What is this research about?

This research measures the total cost of on-site physical, mental and addiction services and supports offered within the City of Toronto's funded homeless shelters. This research combines "direct costs" (service provision and supplies) with "indirect" health care costs (staff support) to determine the actual cost of health care related services within homeless shelters.

KEYWORDS

Health care costs, Homeless shelter, Health economics

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What did the researchers do?

The researchers requested budgetary information from 63 Toronto homeless shelters. This information was then used as a basis for estimating the health care related costs of homeless shelters. Interviews and surveys were also conducted with shelter staff to provide insight into the

amount of time being spent assisting service providers within the shelter. Salaries and benefits of shelter staff were added to the budgetary information to give an overall picture of the total cost of providing health care related services within homeless shelters.



What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that a large portion of shelter funds were being used to pay for health care related activities.

They found additional costs related to providing health care related services within homeless shelters beyond those of medical supplies and direct service provision. The additional costs included salaries and benefits of the shelter staff providing support to the direct service providers, utilities, maintenance and operational costs of the shelter space, resident travel

costs and the costs of medical/hygiene supplies. The researchers found that by only focusing on direct health care related services, only a portion of the health care costs spent in shelters could be calculated. The researchers also found that many of the shelters did not keep accurate records of health care costs and therefore could not be included in the study.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research can be used to inform decision makers about the portion of shelter budgets that are currently being spent on health related services in hopes that that these costs can be recovered. This research can also be used as an example of the need for shelters to improve upon their record keeping practices such that actual health care related services can be included in their budgets.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER



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