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First-of-its-kind homelessness study reveals alarming statistic for California's unhoused

By **Christian Leonard**

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 Gift Article





A new national study on the mortality risk among homeless people found that a 40-year-old person experiencing homelessness has a similar risk of death as a 60-year-old person with housing.

Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

It's long been known that [homeless people](#) are in danger of dying unnecessarily early, but now we have strong data on the increased risk. According to a groundbreaking news study, non-elderly homeless people are about 3.5 times more likely to die in any given year as people with housing. The researchers found that those living in [California](#) are no exception, though unhoused people in New York were slightly better off.

The [study](#), which was recently published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, also showed a 40-year-old person experiencing homelessness has a similar risk of death as a 60-year-old person with housing. The research has not yet been [peer-reviewed](#).

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Previous studies have shown that people experiencing homelessness tend to have early deaths. But the authors of this report, who are researchers at the University of Chicago and the University of Oxford, said it's the "first detailed and accurate picture of mortality" among homeless people across the United States.

The researchers analyzed data on 140,000 homeless people gathered through the 2010 Census, and used Social Security Administration records to track their incomes, disability statuses and other details through 2022. The study focuses on homeless people who were between the ages of 18 and 54 in 2010 because homelessness was rare among the elderly population at that time, the authors said, though other research has shown that's changed.

The study measured death risk by tracking the percentage of homeless people who lived to the end of a six-month period, compared to the share of housed people who lived to the end of that same period. The chart below shows how the share of homeless people alive during the 2010 Census declined over time, with smaller changes seen in the same percentage among housed people both above and below the poverty line.

Factors like having a disability, being unemployed and not having a support network are associated with earlier deaths among homeless people, according to Bruce Meyer, senior researcher for the paper and a professor at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy.

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“If you're in worse physical condition (or) you're disabled, that's going to mean that you're probably more susceptible to the things that could kill you,” Meyer added.

Meyer emphasized that it's unclear from the research whether health issues and lower income cause homelessness, or if people develop health issues and lose their jobs after becoming homeless.

It's probably both, said Dr. Margot Kushel, a UCSF professor who studies the impacts of homelessness on health. People who become homeless tend to have more health issues than the general population, she explained, but homelessness also exposes people to violence and sickness. It also makes it harder to collect and hold on to medication for a chronic condition.

“The reason I started studying homelessness is (because) I realized all the tools in our toolbox to keep people healthy kind of fall apart when people are experiencing homelessness,” Kushel said.

Kushel, who was not involved in the research, said she's not surprised the study showed non-elderly homeless people have a mortality risk more than three times higher than the housed population. A [previous study](#) she led following older homeless people in Oakland found a similar risk.

The study specifically analyzed death rates among California's homeless population — the state had the highest homelessness rate of any state in 2022. The researchers found that homeless people living in California had a similarly high risk of dying early as most other states in the country.

“People always want to think that their situation is unique and different,” Meyer said. “But on average, that's not true.”

New York, however, had a mortality risk about 13% lower than other states. The authors theorized this might be because the state's “right-to-shelter” policy leads to more and higher-quality shelter beds available there. They also think it's possible that the lower mortality rate is a result of homeless people in New York shelters having more money and resources than people in other states.

One of the study's more surprising findings, Meyer added, was that homeless people who were sheltered in 2010 didn't have a different mortality risk than their peers who were unsheltered. This, he added, suggests that while shelter is important, it doesn't address all the challenges homeless people face.

The study does caution that people can go in and out of shelters over time. And Kushel was skeptical of the finding, pointing out prior research indicates people who don't have shelter are much more likely to die early than those who do.

The chances of death for a person experiencing homelessness can also differ depending on their race. In the housed population, according to the study, a Black person has a 40% higher mortality risk than a white person. But within the homeless population, it's the opposite — a Black person has a 27% lower mortality risk than a white person.

While Black people are more likely to become homeless than white people, the authors noted prior studies show homeless white people have higher rates of substance abuse and behavioral health conditions that could put them at higher risk of an early death.

The fact that homeless people are at such a risk of an early death, Meyer said, underscores the severity of their need. Federally funded food assistance and Medicaid, he added, don't seem to be enough.

Affordable housing, Kushel argued, is the main issue. Treatments like medication for substance abuse are important, she said, but they're harder to provide when the patient is experiencing homelessness.

“We're letting people die because we're not fixing the underlying crisis,” Kushel added.

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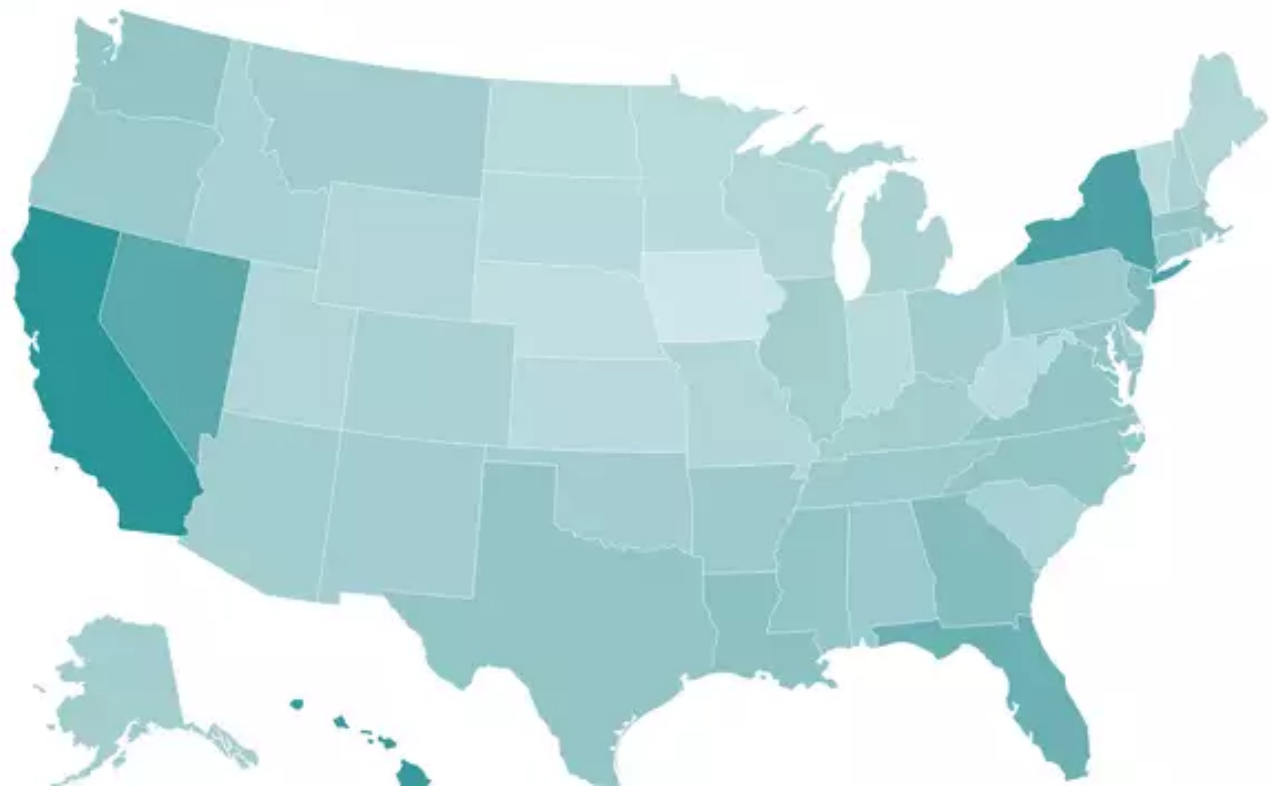
By **Christian Leonard**



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