The Crisis of Unsheltered Older Adults in Los Angeles County: Findings and Recommendations Based on the 2017-2018 Homeless Count

From 2017-2018, the annual point-in-time homeless count in Los Angeles County (LAC) indicated that there was a 21% increase in persons 62 and older. This increase is driven by those who are unsheltered, with the number of unsheltered adults aged 62 and older increasing by 31% from 2017 to 2018. This report further considers the emerging crisis of older adult homelessness by focusing on the unsheltered homeless adult population, which overall constitutes approximately 3/4th of LAC’s total homeless population.

Chronic Versus Episodic Homelessness

Although chronic homelessness among adults aged 55 and older declined from 2017 to 2018, there was a large increase among adults aged 55 and older who have experienced episodic homelessness where persons experience long homeless spells but do not have the disabling chronic health condition that is required to be considered chronically homeless. The fact that housing is prioritized for those who experience chronic homelessness as opposed to episodic homelessness may explain why the former group is declining while the latter group is increasing.

1 This report builds on a recent report that describes the aging trends based on the LAC sheltered homeless population, highlighting the potential returns on investment associated with identifying and intervening with this population. See https://www.as.p.upenn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Emerging-Crisis-of-Aged-Homelessness-1.pdf
2 Because adults who experience long-term homelessness age prematurely, “older adults” for this population is often considered to start at age 55 and sometimes even younger.
3 Chronically homeless implies experiencing homelessness for more than a year continuously, or 4+ times in the last three years for a total of more than a year, and having a mental or physical disability of long duration that housing would help.
In 2018, we found 1,639 older adults fell into homelessness for the first time, which represents a 20% increase from 2017. This suggests that older adults are at increased risk for homelessness for the first time, which is a trend that should continue to be monitored given rising housing costs and often times fixed incomes of older adults. Among those 55 and older, the overall rate of those newly homeless for the first time was 15% in 2018 as compared to 13% in 2017. This compares to higher overall rates of first time homelessness among adults younger than 55, which were 25% in 2018 versus 20% in 2017.

**Locations in L.A. County**

While additional services for unsheltered older adults are clearly going to be necessary, one key question is where these services are needed. Below we see that the largest concentration of older adults is located in SPA 4, with almost 2,700 who are 55 or older in 2018, while the highest proportion of older vs younger unsheltered adults is found in SPA 6 where the older population accounts for 46%, or about 2,600 people.

**Distribution of Unsheltered Adults 55 and Older by SPA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPA</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Antelope Valley</td>
<td>820 / 26%</td>
<td>558 / 23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 San Fernando Valley</td>
<td>1,246 / 23%</td>
<td>1,444 / 27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 San Gabriel Valley</td>
<td>638 / 28%</td>
<td>692 / 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Metro</td>
<td>2,437 / 27%</td>
<td>2,691 / 27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 West</td>
<td>786 / 19%</td>
<td>964 / 29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 South</td>
<td>2,277 / 36%</td>
<td>2,597 / 46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 East</td>
<td>780 / 25%</td>
<td>691 / 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 South Bay</td>
<td>1,030 / 34%</td>
<td>905 / 28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 Newly homeless status is defined as being homeless for the first time and for a period of less than a year.
Health Insurance Coverage

Finally, regardless of geography, the rates of uninsured older adults were found to be significantly greater than overall rates for older adults in LAC, a fact particularly striking given the high medical needs in the unsheltered older adult population. Thus, less than 10% of unsheltered adults 65 or older self-reported having Medicare, even though this health insurance resource covers nearly all individuals in the 65+ age group nationally, including 96% of persons in that age range in LAC (2017). This represents a glaring gap and potential opportunity on behalf of older adult health.

Summary Findings

- The number of unsheltered older adults in LAC is increasing.
- The increase is mostly made up of older adults who experience episodic homelessness and are not prioritized for housing.
- The number of first time, newly homeless older adults is increasing but not as quickly as younger adults or older adults who have experienced multiple episodes and long periods of homelessness without specific chronic health conditions.
- There is a greater concentration of unsheltered older adults in the poorest regions of the county, specifically service planning areas 4 (Metro) and 6 (South Los Angeles).
- High numbers of uninsured are noted among unsheltered older adults.

Policy Implications/Recommendations

- Efforts to prioritize chronically homeless older adults appear to be working but solutions for those who experience episodic, long-term homelessness are needed to reduce the total number of unsheltered older adults.
- There is a need to plan for future expansion of homelessness prevention services for newly homeless older adults and those at risk, given the upward trend.
- Services for older adults should be concentrated in areas where there is highest need, especially SPAS 4 and 6.
- Immediate efforts to engage unsheltered older adults in health insurance programs will be of significant value for their health status and future healthcare costs.