

# Psychiatric Woes and Substance Abuse Come After Homelessness

A recent study of homeless adults in Santa Clara County highlighted that most adults experiencing homelessness were free of substance abuse and psychiatric illness before first losing their residence.

Stanford University surveyed 1,437 homeless adults between November 1989 and June 1990, and the results help to debunk most myths about homelessness.

One third of the men, who out-number women and children among the homeless, had attended some college. More than 75 percent had supported themselves by working before they lost their residence, with 41% of men and 25% of women holding continuous employment since age 18.

Two-thirds of those surveyed were ages 25-44. Blacks were over-represented, comprising more than 30% of those sampled, though they made up 3 percent of the population. Such differences between subgroups of the homeless illustrate the need for specialized social services and health care interventions to counter the downward spiral to further poverty and ill health.

Eleven percent of those sampled did report that physical health problems, mostly injuries to medically uninsured young working men, precipitated the first episode of homelessness. Researchers speculate that the high cost of housing and financial vulnerability of working people appeared to be the major factors leading to homelessness.

Alcohol and drug disorders, as well as psychiatric facility admissions, were no more than 12 percentage points higher among the homeless than a sampling of more than 3,000 Californians with a house or apartment. Rates of addictive and psychiatric problems were 15 - 33 percent higher after homelessness. Non-sheltered homeless data was similar to the sheltered population.

While addictive and mental disorders appeared to play little or no role in causing homelessness, both of these problems increased significantly after people lost their residence. Put more succinctly: "I think that homelessness makes you crazy...that's what the researchers are saying," states Barry Del Buono, Executive Director of the nonprofit Emergency Housing Consortium in Santa Clara County.

