

Cal-VEX 2020: Sexual Violence and Intimate Partner Violence History Among Those Experiencing Homelessness in California

BACKGROUND

Data from the US Housing and Urban Development Office (HUD) show that there were more than 150,000 homeless people in California in 2019, representing a 16% increase from the prior year.¹ Mass unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to lead to a 40-45% jump in homelessness by the end of 2020.² It is important to note that HUD data do not capture the number of families fleeing domestic violence who stay in shelters or housing programs operated by victim service providers.³ This is critical, because as many as 57% of all homeless women report domestic violence was the immediate cause of their homelessness.⁴ Research also shows a link between homelessness and histories of sexual violence and intimate partner violence (IPV)^{5,6} in which homelessness is both a risk factor for and consequence of this abuse. However, the scope and scale of this association in the state is not well known.

Objective. To assess prevalence of homelessness, and prevalence of sexual violence and IPV among those with and without a history of homelessness, among a representative sample of California residents in 2020.

METHODS

The California Study on Violence Experiences Across the Lifespan (Cal-VEX) is a state-representative survey on experiences of sexual and physical violence conducted with 2115 California residents aged 18 and older.⁷

Measures. In this survey, sexual violence was defined as forced sex by any perpetrator. IPV was measured by reports of physical violence, sexual harassment, and/or sexual violence from a romantic partner or spouse. In addition to survey items on sexual violence and IPV, demographic characteristics were assessed, including ever having experienced homelessness, living “on the streets or in a shelter.”⁷

Analysis. We examine prevalence of homelessness among the total sample and by sex and race/ethnicity. We also assessed history of sexual violence and IPV for the total sample by sex, race/ethnicity, and by history of homelessness. Analyses use sex as a proxy for gender, as the sample size for transgender and other gender identifying individuals was too small to accurately represent the experience of these populations.

FINDINGS

Experiences with Homelessness

One in eight respondents (13%) have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. These findings vary when examined by respondent gender and race.

- 12% of females and 15% of males had experienced homelessness.
- By race/ethnicity, 29% of Black participants, 18% of Hispanic participants, 14% of other (including multiracial) participants reported a history of homelessness, compared with 10% of white participants.

History of Sexual Violence & Intimate Partner Violence

Overall, 10% of participants (16% of females, 3% of males) have experienced sexual violence.

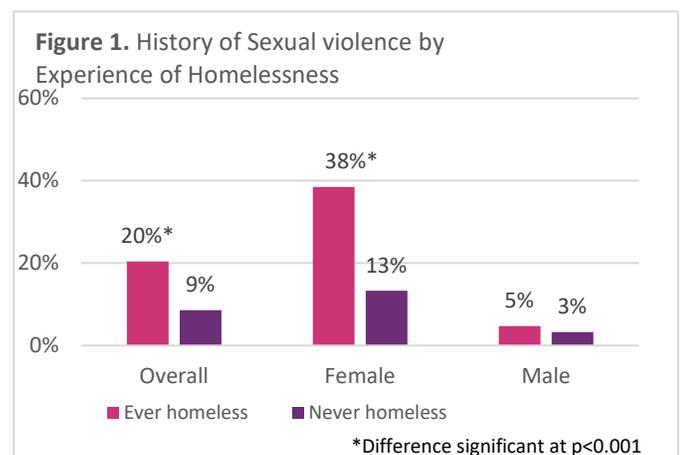
- By race/ethnicity, 12% of Black participants, 10% of Hispanic participants, 16% of other (including multiracial) participants, and 11% of white participants reported sexual violence.

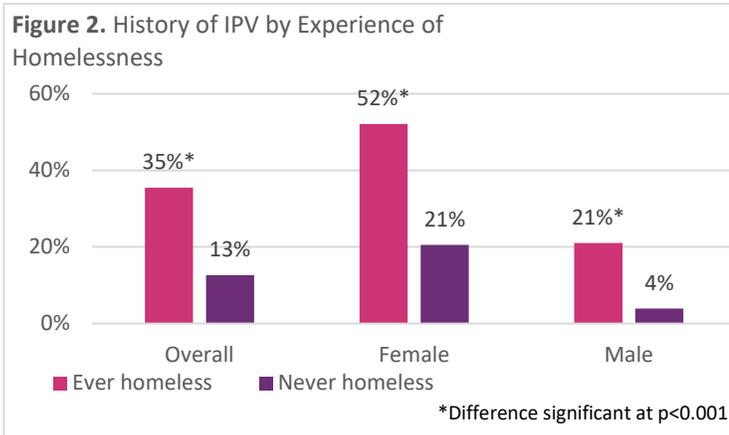
Overall, 16% of participants (24% of females, 6% of males) have experienced IPV.

- By race/ethnicity, 21% of Black participants, 17% of Hispanic participants, 25% of other (including multiracial) participants and 15% of white participants reported IPV.

Intersection of Violence, Homelessness, and Gender

As shown in Figure 1, sexual violence was more likely among those





with versus without a history of homelessness: 20% vs 9% ($p < 0.001$).

- The association between homelessness and sexual violence held true for both females (38% vs 13%, $p < 0.001$) and males (5% vs 3%, $p < 0.001$).

As shown in Figure 2, IPV was more likely among those with a history of homelessness: 35% vs 13% ($p < 0.001$).

- This association between homelessness and IPV held true for both females (52% vs 21%, $p < 0.001$) and males (21% vs 4%, $p < 0.001$).

CONCLUSION

The prevalence of traumatic violent experiences in the lives of people who have experienced homelessness is high. Findings also demonstrate that females and certain ethnic groups are disproportionately represented among those reporting homelessness. Due to data limitations, we were unable to assess the intersections of race and gender in our assessment of homelessness, sexual violence, and IPV. It is hypothesized, however, that Black, Hispanic, and other/multiracial females who have experienced sexual violence and IPV would be of even greater risk for homelessness.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND ACTION

Given the intersection of violence and homelessness, it is critical to adopt a trauma-informed approach when designing strategies to meet the needs of California's homeless population. The social and health needs of survivors of violent experiences will require additional training in these topics for staff working among homeless populations. Furthermore, efforts to reduce homelessness or lessen consequences of homelessness must take into account the multiple vulnerabilities conveyed by gender, race, and violent experiences among homeless individuals. Strategies and policies directed towards these populations will be most effective if they not only acknowledge but actively work to lessen gender and racial inequities and experiences of violence.

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