

An Introduction to the Homelessness, Housing & Poverty Issue

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We are pleased to present this special issue of the *Delaware Journal of Public Health*, with a focus on homelessness, housing and poverty. These three topics are tightly intertwined with each other, and with public health. Briefly put, as both poverty and access to affordable housing become more acute, homelessness becomes more widespread and entrenched. Poverty and housing are both elemental in their roles as social determinants of health; as deprivation of income and housing impacts both individual and population health in numerous ways. When economic and housing conditions lead to homelessness, this confluence produces a multiplier effect, as existing health conditions become exacerbated and vulnerabilities to a range of new health risks abound.

This issue features an unprecedented collection of studies on these three intertwined topics as they manifest in a Delaware context. While homelessness, housing and poverty are all prominent problems in Delaware, most of our understanding about the dynamics of these topics comes from other places and do not factor in Delaware's unique constellation of political, services and socioeconomic structures. As such, these studies start to define how broader dynamics around public health and services provision play out in this unique setting.

We present these studies in three sections. In the first section, six studies use different empirical data sources to show how homelessness plays out in Delaware in specific populations and circumstances.

- Metraux (one of the issue editors) and Peuquet use almost two decades worth of counts of people experiencing homelessness and beds that shelter them to show how, perversely, homelessness in Delaware is at unprecedented levels while the supply of temporary housing available to shelter them has seen substantial cutbacks.
- Two studies, Borton et al. and Metraux and Modeas, apply data from state systems to document alarmingly high levels of homelessness among people in known risk groups: those who receive behavioral health treatment services and those who are on the state's sex offender registry, respectively.
- Roberts and Mohan use data collected from interviewing services providers to document the extreme vulnerability to homelessness and housing insecurity experienced by individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities who are served by the state's Division of Developmental Disabilities Services in the midst of the current housing crisis.

- Nescott et al. demonstrate a hidden cost of homelessness, estimating that, in 2019, experiencing homelessness was associated with excess Medicaid costs of \$4,611 (non-chronic homelessness) to \$5,218 (chronic homelessness) per person.
- Cutuli et al. develop an approach that matches homeless, Medicaid, and eviction court data and show the feasibility of such an approach to identify adults and children who are at risk for health complications associated with their housing instability.

These studies are noteworthy in their compelling documentations of how housing need specifically impacts vulnerable populations, and the urgency for housing-specific responses to be part of the mix of services that most of those in the populations studied receive from healthcare, social services and criminal justice systems in Delaware. Beyond this, the studies collectively bring to bear, in a manner unprecedented in Delaware, the power of data to inform policy and services on homelessness in Delaware. These studies lay a foundation for an empirically grounded research agenda and additional innovative uses of available data.

The second section of this issue features seven analyses of special topics within the realm where homelessness, housing and poverty intersect. Nescott et al. provide an overview of poverty in Delaware, the first such assessment to incorporate the years following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dillard and Mers take a deeper dive into a specific aspect of poverty with her focus on the “benefits cliff” faced by extremely low- and low-income families when they attempt to gain economic self-sufficiency.

Other analyses show how homelessness, housing and poverty exacerbate preexisting disparities in a range of health and social outcomes (Rent); magnify the impact of climate change (Perez & Swiatek); and represent burdens borne disproportionately by sexual minority groups (Mitsdarffer et al.) and domestic violence survivors (Beard). Finally, Millard et al. demonstrate the need for housing repair assistance, and how modest help with home repairs and modifications act to both preserve housing stock and enable healthier lives. Each of these studies opens a door into a specific facet of the topics covered in this special issue, and situate it in Delaware, thereby giving it dimensions that are at once more familiar and more difficult to ignore.

The third section provides seven views from providers who bear witness to the quotidian manifestations of homelessness, housing scarcity, and poverty and simultaneously labor to ameliorate the concomitant deprivations. Taylor and Young each report from their vantage points as heads of the United Way of Delaware and the Delaware State Housing Authority, respectively, on assistance for housing development (Taylor) and homeless services (Young). Kalmbach and Laymon each describe their programs; the former an art-inspired day center and the latter a Christian-oriented shelter and transitional housing facility, and put forth two very different approaches to addressing homelessness, a problem that both acknowledge, for different reasons, is getting worse. Rounding out these dispatches are ones from:

- Blanch on how Beebe Health System has been expanding its commitment to identifying and responding to the social determinants of health of its patient population and support connection to appropriate resources.
- August on Jefferson Street Center, a community development corporation, and its efforts at revitalization and community-building in Northeast Wilmington.

- Strmel on how Delaware's Division of Public Health implemented COVID-19 prevention and mitigation strategies in Delaware's homeless shelters.

These provider perspectives complement those provided by the empirical research studies in the first section and the analyses in the second section.

Taken together, the studies in this issue show the many ways in which homelessness, housing and poverty manifest themselves in Delaware. The reader will get a good idea of not only the challenges faced by those involved with these topics, but also the work that is being done. It promises to give the reader a solid point of departure from which to continue the critical work of addressing these issues.

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