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Is Street Medicine Effective in Improving Access to Healthcare?

Kristen Capelli

INTRODUCTION

Street Medicine is a collaboration of healthcare professionals, formerly homeless outreach workers, and social workers that bring healthcare to the people who are experiencing homelessness.

The unique needs of the unsheltered homeless are met right in their own environment. The approach of Street Medicine is to engage with and treat people experiencing homelessness exactly where they are. Care is given on the homeless' own terms to maximally reduce or eliminate barriers to care to access and follow-through (Health, 2020)

SIGNIFICANCE

- People living in shelters are more than twice as likely to have a disability compared to the general population (Health, 2020)
- in 2017, 20% of the homeless population reported having a serious mental illness. 16% of these conditions were related to chronic substance abuse and more than 10,000 people had HIV/AIDS (Health, 2020).
- Conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and HIV/AIDS are found at high rates among the homeless population, sometimes 3-6 times higher than that of the general population (Health, 2020).
- More than 10% of people who seek substance abuse or mental health treatment in our public health system are homeless. People who have mental health and substance use disorders and who are homeless are more likely to have immediate, life threatening physical illnesses and live in dangerous conditions (Health, 2020).
- Common communicable diseases often effect homeless populations more severely than other populations. The recent emergence of COVID-19 calls for enhanced cooperation between public health authorities, homeless service systems, and other partners at the local level (Diseases, 2020).

POSITION STATEMENT

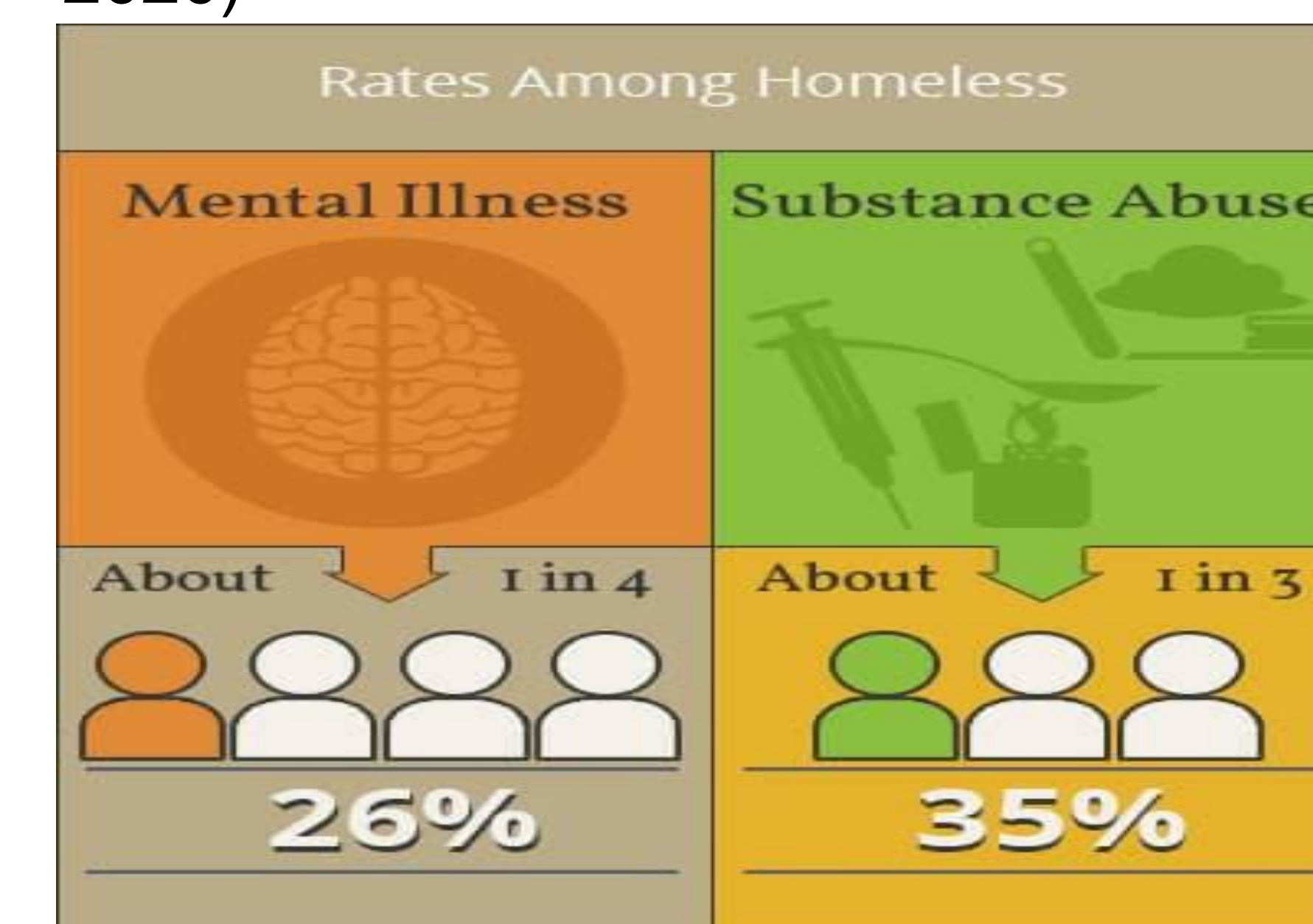
As healthcare workers, we strive for a healthy populace. The homeless are a part of that populace; bringing healthcare workers to the streets is an integral part of both the healthcare system as a whole, as well as the morals that brought us to a career in healthcare in the first place.

SUPPORT FOR POSITION

- All care is provided free of charge and delivered onsite including dispensing medications and drawing blood for testing (Street, 2020).
- Not only does street medicine offer care – often lifesaving care, but it also reduces costs for communities by addressing many health concerns before they intensify (Street, 2020).
- Street medicine offers services that address the circumstances contributing to the mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing of our nation's homeless (Street, 2020).
- Street medicine seeks to help provide homeless with portable sinks, toilets, and water. Also, currently, street medicine teams are helping provide tents to homeless in an effort to assist in isolating due to CoViD-19 (Gerisch, 2020).
- As with the early days of HIV, we must work to fight the stigmatization of our patients. Information and love are the treatment to combat the ignorance and fear that can kill as well as any virus (Gerisch, 2020).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Help homeless individuals enroll in Medicaid if they are uninsured. Hospitals that implement presumptive eligibility programs can immediately enroll patients who are likely eligible under a state's Medicaid eligibility guidelines for a temporary period of time, based on information provided by the individual (Wilkins, 2020).
- Hospitals should recognize homelessness as a "vital sign" that should be integrated into routine screening when vulnerable patients visit a hospital. Hospitals can encourage the consistent use of the ICD-10 (International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision) diagnosis code for homelessness (Z59.0) in medical records, making it easier to use hospital data to identify patients who experience homelessness, plan for appropriate discharge and care coordination, and better understand the needs, costs, and patterns of service use for these patients (Wilkins, 2020).
- Identify people who are frequent users of emergency and/or inpatient care and partner with community programs to find housing. Partnerships that include hospitals and providers in the homelessness assistance system can offer housing as a platform for engaging people in more appropriate care for their health and social support needs (Wilkins, 2020)



(Addiction, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Without Street Medicine, there would be a significant amount of homeless citizens without any medical care or access to clean supplies. Homeless people are just that, people. It is our mission as healthcare professionals to not discriminate and to provide the same level of care to every human being regardless of their social status or ability to pay. Street Medicine ultimately strives to destigmatize homelessness in an effort to ensure that every American citizen is taken care of completely.

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