

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTHCARE NEEDS IN HOMELESS YOUNG WOMEN:

A LITERATURE REVIEW

By

ALEXA QUEENIE TAGABAN

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Approved by:

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Dr. Sheila Hill Parker  
Department of Public Health



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Alexa Queenie Tagaban

University of Arizona

### Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of unsafe sexual practices, social isolation, and lack of access to menstrual products in homeless women. A literature review was chosen to identify and summarize findings related to the reproductive healthcare needs in the homeless women population. The literature reviewed in this paper consisted of reports and studies available from academic, and government sources. The review was conducted primarily through searches in online databases, publications, and other industry resources. The primary focus of this review was to further understand the complications of unmet subsistence needs and effect on high prevalence rates of infections in homeless women. By identifying the factors that increase infection rates, it is the goal of this thesis that future programs and interventions can focus more on what homeless women specifically need.

### Reproductive Healthcare Needs in Homeless Young Women: A Literature Review

Homelessness is a traumatic experience and a public health issue affecting the population's overall health and well-being. It is a complex problem that are affected by many socioeconomic and political factors like poverty, racism, mental or physical health, addiction, and family dynamics. Just in United States alone, 3.5 million Americans are experiencing homelessness annually. In this group, 17% identify as women (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010). Homeless women, more specifically, are affected unjustifiably due to their sexual and reproductive health needs (Gelberg, Browner, Lejano, & Arangua, 2008). Thus, this literature review aims to discuss the comprehensive reproductive healthcare needs of young women, ages 18 to 35 years experiencing homelessness worldwide.

It is well-known that the homeless population are at more risk for infections and deaths compared to their housed peers, but patterns of mortality for homeless women have been given less attention. The overall life expectancy for homeless people are 30 years less than the average American (Williams & Bryant, 2018). This population is encountering significantly higher rates of infections, chronic conditions, and mortality. In 2018, 3% more women identified as homeless which is a higher rate compared to only a 1% increase in men (Henry et al., 2018). This means that homelessness is changing from a male dominated domain to something more diverse that includes women and LGBTQ youth. The rising population of women in the streets is also alarming and must be examined to assess the overall need of this population. While all homeless women are at risk, a study shows that the mortality rate for younger women are 5 to 30 times higher than expected (Cheung & Hwang, 2004). Thus, efforts to decrease the mortality rates should focus on homeless women under 45 years of age.

A stable social network contact also affects the risk of developing sexually transmitted infections. Homeless men are proven to have more stable housed connections and same-sex friends, and young women are more likely to have opposite-sex friends which increases their sexual and violence risk (Valente & Auerswald, 2013). Homeless young women, in particular, are also at risk for developing sexually transmitted infections. Compared to young homeless men, they have higher STI rates due lower condom use and higher likelihood of sex with injected drug users, or IDU (Valente & Auerswald, 2013). Young homeless women are more likely to be isolated in the streets, and for survival, they turn to street-based men for protection while offering sex in return. This means that homeless women being marginalized from society, depending on their sexual partners, and having less engagement in female friendships can greatly increase their sexual health risk. Based on these findings, it is clear that in order to tackle the high rates of STIs in homeless women, strategies should involve creating a safe, learning environment where homeless women can foster relationships with other women, and learn about their reproductive health.

Reproductive and gynecological problems are common in the population of homeless women. Young homeless women are of childbearing age and have menstruation cycles that can increase their risk of getting an infection. Several reproductive tract infections are known to increase the risk of Pelvic Inflammatory Disease, or PID, which can lead to inflammation and even scarring (Brotman & Ghanem, 2015). A study reports that 43% of this population has at least one gynecologic symptom or condition and this rate increases twice as much for women who report unmet subsistence needs (Riley et al., 2011). Unmet subsistence needs mean that this population lacks basic resources like food, hygiene, and shelter. The correlation between the two

factors suggest that any advancement in reproductive treatment or medicine can only work to its full capacity if the subsistence needs are met.

Menstrual hygiene is especially important for homeless women to improve their overall health. It is hypothesized that menstrual blood provides a favorable environment for the cervical mucus, as well as nutrients for growth and adherence of an organism (Brotman & Ghanem, 2015). The vaginal microbiota is sensitive, and fluctuations may occur from menses and sexual activity. Managing the menstruation cycle can be unhygienic and inconvenient for those in poorer environments. Many women in the streets reuse cotton clothes which are not well sanitized because they are either cleaned without soap or not cleaned often (Das et al., 2015). Often, homeless women use toilet paper, or other unhygienic materials to soak up the blood during menses because of lack of access to menstruation products (Sumpter & Torondel, 2013). It is imperative, therefore, that homeless women have access to menstruation products for health and hygienic purposes. However, essential menstruation items like tampons or pads are taxed as luxury items in about 40 states (Scaramella & Fagan, 2016). It is important for future interventions to educate homeless women about the dangers of unhygienic practices and increase access to menstruation products for improvement of overall health.

Homelessness is a complex issue by itself. In addition to problems like finding a shelter or applying for jobs, homeless women are affected by barriers that negatively impacts their reproductive health. This literature review found that homeless women have a dire need for a comprehensive health program that tackles issues of social isolation, unhygienic practices, and unprotected sexual activities. The data have shown that young homeless women have higher mortality rates than the general population due to unmet subsistence needs and communicable infections. Comprehensive health programs targeting reproductive health make a difference.

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