



Housing and Health

Housing plays an influential role in a host of areas, including, for example, economic well-being, education, climate change, and public health. This brief describes some of the key contributions of housing to health which synergistically further State public policy objectives.

Housing provides shelter, fundamentally impacting physical and mental health.

Many aspects of housing affect public health, e.g. location, structural and safety features, indoor environmental quality (IEQ) of air, water, materials. As residents spend about 70% of their time in a residence, the design and features of homes can reduce exposure to pollutants, allergens, and injuries. Poor indoor air quality, for example, contributes to cardiovascular disease and asthma. Respiratory allergens and irritants affect the development and severity of asthma, one of the most expensive medical conditions. It has been estimated that \$1- \$4 billion annual savings or productivity gains could be realized from reduced cases of allergens and asthma.ⁱ

Lack of safe and sanitary shelter, homelessness and housing insecurity are associated with a variety of poor mental and physical health outcomes. Homeless children are more vulnerable to developmental delays, depression and mental health problems. Stable affordable housing avoids or alleviates stress and the cost of treating adverse health outcomes.



[Fox Courts, Oakland, Resources for Community Dev.](#)



[Madison at 14th Apartments, Oakland \(SAHA\)](#)

Housing costs directly affect family resources available for other items, including food and health care.

Families with high portions of household income spent on rent or mortgages are often unable to afford nutritious food. Inadequate nutrition is especially critical for both physical and mental child development.

Strained household budgets from high housing costs also influence the ability to afford medical and dental care and insurance. For example, adults experiencing foreclosure are less likely to have health insurance coverage than the general population, and less likely to fill prescriptions.ⁱⁱ Affordable housing developments limit housing payments relative to resident incomes, freeing up family resources for other necessities.

Housing quality standards and rehabilitation can avoid adverse health outcomes and improve health.

The greatest health risks are posed by older, substandard homes, often occupied by lower income households. Housing quality is a social determinant of health; and is receiving increased attention for prevention of disease and injury. Children, the elderly and individuals with chronic illness are particularly susceptible to illness related to unsafe housing conditions. Poor housing quality is a predictor of emotional and behavioral problems in low-income children and youth, as living in unhealthy conditions affects parenting.ⁱⁱⁱ Housing quality standards avoid or reduce overcrowding and unsafe conditions such as exposure to allergens, mold, and environmental contaminants such as lead. Crowding, particularly when coupled with unsanitary housing conditions, can increase vulnerability to infectious disease.

Energy efficiency, improved ventilation, moisture reduction, and other green building standards have been demonstrated to improve respiratory and general health. Substantial housing rehabilitation directly impacts home health, reducing health care costs for the residents. “Healthy Homes” approaches incorporate improvements to indoor environmental quality, benefiting resident health in energy efficiency and green building programs.

Multifamily housing developments can host and coordinate health care and related supportive service delivery.

Multifamily housing developments are often used as platforms for integrating healthcare, especially for the elderly. A number of housing developments in major metropolitan areas include health clinics and community spaces, and tenant services for special needs populations such as elderly and disabled. Supportive services have multiple benefits, for both tenants and property management.

Integrated service delivery plays a critical role with populations at risk of homelessness or institutionalization.



[Mercy Housing @ 7th & H St., Sacramento](#)

There is growing evidence of the role walking can play in improving health.

Neighborhoods designed to facilitate active transportation - walking, and biking - facilitate weight control and other health benefits.^{iv} Given the obesity epidemic, this is critical for all ages. Walkability is influenced by neighborhood design and accessibility to transit, employment, schools, services and recreational opportunities and amenities. “Safe routes to school,” for example, is an important benefit for parents and children.

These features enable less reliance on auto use, reducing GHG emissions and other pollutants detrimental to public health. Walkable, mixed use neighborhoods can encourage social interaction, which in turn benefits health outcomes.

These features also facilitate more independent lifestyles for aging residents. “Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities,” (NORCs) for example, are being developed, featuring community-based services enabling elders to “age in place” in their homes and neighborhoods.

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ⁱⁱ *The Impacts of Affordable Housing on Health: A Research Summary*, R. Cohen, Center for Housing Policy Insights, May 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ MacArthur Foundation, *How Housing Matters* (2013) *Poor Quality Housing is Tied to Children's Emotional and Behavioral Problems*.

^{iv} "Walk It Out: Urban Design Plays Key Role in Creating Healthy Cities," Science Daily, Mar.7, 2013.