

# Self-Identification of Mental Health Problems Among Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness

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## WHY IS THIS RESEARCH IMPORTANT?

- In 2020, **30.6% of young adults** in the United States **experienced any mental illness** (10.2 million) and 9.7% experienced a serious mental illness (3.3 million; SAMSHA, 2021).
- Approximately **4.2 million young adults** in the US, **experience housing instability or homelessness** each year (Morton et al., 2018).
- Young adults experiencing homelessness (YAEH) have high rates of mental health problems but low rates of mental health service use.
- **Young adulthood is a critical period** for identifying and treating mental health problems with the potential to change trajectories of illness and health across the life span (Wood et al, 2018).
- Currently, there are gaps in our knowledge related to self-identification of mental health problems in YAEH. While we know that YAEH have significant mental health symptoms, **it is not clear whether they are identifying symptoms as problems in need of treatment.**

## HOW WAS THIS RESEARCH CONDUCTED?

- This study focused on self-identification of mental health problems among a **large sample of YAEH (1426 participants) across seven cities** and the relationship of self-identification to perception of unmet need for services and use of formal mental health services including therapy and medications.
- The team created a questionnaire and study protocol for recruiting and screening that was utilized consistently across all locations. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be **experiencing housing insecurity** the prior night (being in a shelter, streets, transitional housing, not being able to stay with family or acquaintances for more than 30 days) and be **between the ages of 18 to 26.**

## WHAT WERE THE KEY FINDINGS?

- Self-identification of a mental health problem was positively associated with use of therapy, medications, and reporting unmet needs.
- **Just over one-third of the sample (35.2%) identified as 'yes' to having a mental health problem.** Another 22.2% endorsed the option 'not sure' about having a mental health problem. Notably, **41.5% responded 'no' that they did not consider themselves to have a mental health problem,** even though the sample only included those that screened positive on mental health symptom screeners.
- Those who indicated that they had previously been diagnosed by a doctor with a mental disorder and those who reported having been in the foster care system were also more likely to identify as having a mental health problem.

## ACTION STEPS

While critical aspects of access to services need to be addressed to ensure YAEH who have more severe symptoms receive them, it appears that **there is a mismatch between requiring YAEH to identify as having a mental health problem to access services and the current narratives of many YAEH that do not see themselves as having a problem.**

Clinicians should **create interventions that target understanding mental health, through psychoeducation** or reframe conversations around wellness, **reducing the need to self-identify.**

Recognize that problem identification may be part of a developmental process.



## CONTINUE READING

### Full Article

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### About Sarah Narendorf

<https://bit.ly/3kiOqTJ>