



# ARCTIC HEALTH

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## Old and homeless: a review and survey of older adults who use shelters in an urban setting.

<https://arctichealth.org/en/permalink/ahliterature184211>

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Source: Can J Psychiatry. 2003 Jul;48(6):374-80

Date: Jul-2003

Language: English

Publication Type: Article

Keywords: Aged  
Canada - epidemiology  
Catchment Area (Health)  
England - epidemiology  
Female  
Homeless Persons - statistics & numerical data  
Housing  
Humans  
Male  
Middle Aged  
Questionnaires  
Socioeconomic Factors  
United States - epidemiology  
Urban Population

Abstract: Research on the mental health and service needs of homeless seniors has been scant. This paper reviews the available literature and presents findings of a Toronto survey in an effort to describe the demographics of homeless seniors, their level of impairment, and their mental and physical health needs.

We searched the Medline, AgeLine, and PsycINFO databases, using the following key words: elderly homeless, elderly hostel users, and urban geriatrics. To better describe the service needs of the elderly homeless, we obtained demographic data from the Community and Neighbourhood Services Department and distributed a survey questionnaire to 11 Toronto hostel directors. The questionnaire elicited data relating to reasons for shelter use, problem behaviours, and mental health needs of those over age 65 years.

Although seniors represent a small percentage of the homeless population, their numbers are growing. The available literature suggests a high prevalence of psychiatric disorders and cognitive impairment in this population, with a greater proportion of older women than men having severe mental illness. Further, our survey suggests that the service needs of elderly hostel users in Toronto differ from those of their younger counterparts. The homeless elderly are the most vulnerable of this impoverished population. Although more research is needed to define their mental and physical health needs and ways of meeting them, their characteristics appear to be unique. Geriatric psychiatrists could play a significant role in evaluating and treating this population more comprehensively.

PubMed ID: 12894611 [View in PubMed](#) 