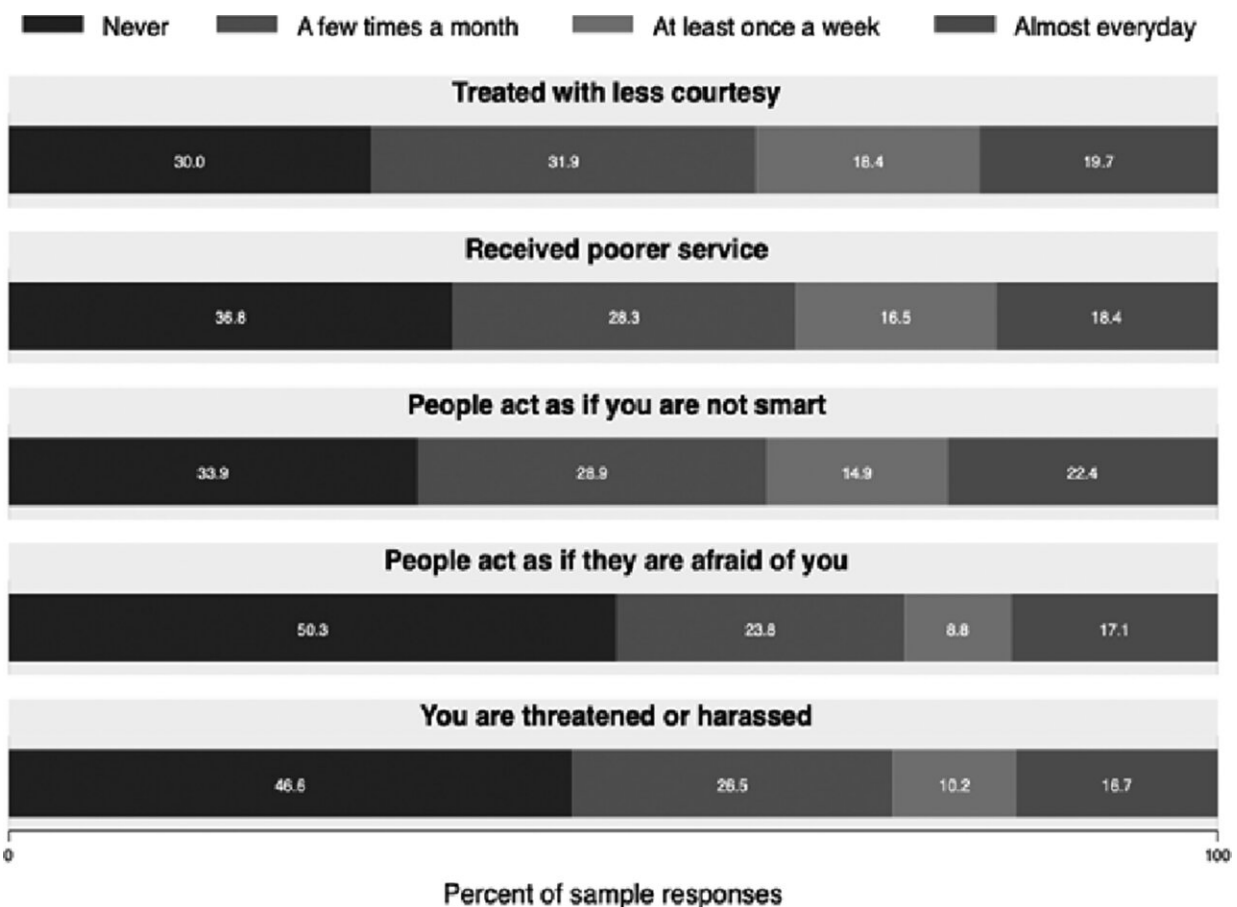


Los Angeles County's unhoused population faces high levels of discrimination, violence

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Frequency of routine discriminatory experiences reported in Everyday Discrimination Scale. Credit: *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2024). DOI: 10.1016/j.amepre.2024.06.016

Research from UCLA Fielding School of Public Health's Randall Kuhn and colleagues at UCLA and USC shows the health risk for people experiencing homelessness goes beyond challenges inherent to living without shelter.

For the estimated 75,000 people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County, the material hardships inherent to their [living conditions](#) are compounded by an alarming level of discrimination and vulnerability to physical and [sexual violence](#), according to a new study [published](#) in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

L.A. County has nearly 11% of the U.S. population of people experiencing homelessness, and more than 20% of people experiencing unsheltered or chronic homelessness, say the researchers from the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, and the UCLA Integrated Substance Abuse Programs (UCLA-ISAP).

In a mobile-based tracking survey of 332 unhoused individuals residing in the county, nearly 1 in 3 (32%) reported being subjected to daily discrimination over the previous month, and more than half (54%) had experienced discrimination in the past week.

These reported affronts included being treated with less courtesy, receiving poorer service, and people acting as if they weren't smart or were afraid of them, as well as being threatened or harassed.

By comparison, previous studies involving general populations of minoritized groups have found lifetime discrimination rates ranging from 13% to 60%. The survey also found that in the previous 30 days, 16% of people experiencing homelessness were victims of [physical violence](#) and 7.5% were victims of sexual violence.

Among general populations in major U.S. cities, past-year rates are 3% for physical violence and 0.24% for sexual violence.

"Our study highlights the crushing burden of violence and discrimination faced by our unhoused neighbors in L.A. County," said Dr. Randall Kuhn, a UCLA Fielding professor of community health sciences and co-leader of the study team.

"We know, from previous research that my public health colleagues and I have done, that everyday discrimination and racism can have long-term effects on health—and that, because of many factors, people experiencing homelessness have dramatically lower life expectancy than their housed counterparts. This study suggests that people's responses to homelessness and their treatment of unhoused people exacerbate these problems."

The study represents the first paper to emerge from the PATHS (Periodic Assessment of Trajectories of Housing, Homelessness and Health) project—a first-of-its-kind survey that uses digital technology to contact nearly 700 unhoused people each month in order to track their experiences and well-being over time.

PATHS was co-founded in 2022 by Kuhn and Dr. Benjamin Henwood, who directs USC's Center for Homelessness, Housing and Health Equity Research. The current paper was led by Dr. Howard Padwa of UCLA-ISAP and Jessie Chien, a UCLA Fielding doctoral student.

"Many view people experiencing homelessness as individuals to be feared, or as victims of circumstance, but not necessarily as victims of the cruelty of others," said Padwa. "It's important to understand that the suffering of these individuals living in our midst comes from more than just deprivation; it's also from cruelty."

The researchers argued that decades of failed policies have contributed to the problem of homelessness, and that the stigmatization of the population has resulted in unhoused individuals too often being treated with scorn rather than empathy.

"The public is tired of this problem," said Henwood, "and rather than look at it as failed policy, people tend to get frustrated and blame the victims of those policies." In particular, the researchers noted, negative attitudes toward individuals with [severe mental illness](#) and substance disorders, both of which are common among people experiencing homelessness, may compound the stigma and discrimination experienced by unhoused individuals.

The study is especially notable in light of the U.S. Supreme Court's June 28 ruling in *Grants Pass v. Johnson* in support of the constitutionality of so-called camping bans, which allow communities to fine, ticket, or arrest people living unsheltered and encamped in public spaces, even if they have nowhere else to go.

"These anti-camping laws give a permission structure to say that unhoused people are the problem," Kuhn said. "And as policing is used against people experiencing homelessness, it contributes to their being afraid to fight back and report any crime, much less an indignity such as being treated badly."

Although the study found that people experiencing homelessness were more likely to report being victims of poor treatment and violence if they were unsheltered, those who reported staying in shelters were also at significantly elevated risk of physical violence. The PATHS survey has found that about half of people who go into shelters end up back on the street, in part because the shelters are unsafe environments.

The researchers called for stepped-up efforts to address and reduce the

impacts of discrimination and violence on the unhoused population. These include decriminalizing homelessness and educating the public in ways that humanize and build empathy for people experiencing homelessness.

More information: Howard Padwa et al, Homelessness, Discrimination, and Violent Victimization in Los Angeles County, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.amepre.2024.06.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2024.06.016)

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