



Improving the Health of All Americans through Safe and Healthy Housing

Poor quality and inadequate housing contributes to health problems such as infectious and chronic diseases, injuries and inadequate childhood development.

Housing: Health Reform and Beyond

America is in the midst of a national discussion on how to reform our health care system. Health reform is essential, but improving the health of all Americans requires broadening our view beyond medical care. There is much more to health than health care. Our chances of becoming sick and dying early are greatly influenced by powerful social factors including income, education, nutrition and housing.

Commission Recommendation on Health and Housing

Recognizing that health is shaped by where and how we live, learn, work and play, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America issued 10 recommendations for improving the health of all Americans. Ensuring safe and healthy housing through a mix of public and private-sector policy figured prominently:

RECOMMENDATION: HOUSING POLICY

Develop a “health impact” rating for housing and infrastructure projects that reflects the projected effects on community health and provides incentives for projects that earn the rating.

- All homes, workplaces and neighborhoods should be safe and free from health hazards.
- Communities should mobilize to correct severe physical deficiencies in housing, and health should be built into all efforts to improve housing, particularly in low-income neighborhoods.
- New federal housing investments should be held accountable to demonstrate health impact.

Housing Policy Environment

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 included funding for capital funds; renovation, weatherization and “greening” of low-income housing; lead hazard reduction in housing; homelessness prevention and re-housing activities, ranging from rent subsidies to case management; and community development block grants.

The Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) jointly released a report, “The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Promote Healthy Homes,” that reinforces the importance of creating healthy home environments for all Americans. The report is a call to action to the public and government to ensure healthy, safe, affordable and accessible homes; to conduct healthy homes research; and to translate research into practice and policy. Since 1999, the CDC/HUD Healthy Homes Initiative has reconnected health objectives with housing, identifying housing deficiencies that affect health, safety and quality of life and reducing health risks related to poor quality housing.

Congress has an important opportunity to sustain and enhance federal, state and local Healthy Homes initiatives – including public-private collaborative programs – by increasing resources and expanding housing education, inspection and enforcement roles of public health agencies at the local, state and national levels.

Facts and Figures

More than 6 million occupied housing units in the United States have moderate or severe physical deficiencies.

Substandard housing conditions can lead to poor health:

- Lead poisoning irreversibly affects brain and nervous system development, resulting in lower intelligence and reading disabilities. Between 1998 and 2000, a quarter of the nation's housing—24 million homes—was estimated to have significant lead-based paint hazards.
- Indoor allergens and dampness play an important role in the development and exacerbation of respiratory conditions including asthma, which currently affects over 20 million Americans and is the most common chronic disease among children. Among the 6.7 million children with diagnosed asthma approximately 40 percent of cases are believed to be attributable to residential exposures.
- Structural features of the home—such as steep staircases and balconies, lack of safety devices such as window guards and smoke detectors and substandard heating systems— can lead to injury. In 2007, nearly one-half of the 34.3 million medically consulted injury and poisoning episodes occurred in or around the home.

Housing is often unaffordable:

- An estimated 17 million households in the United States pay more than 50 percent of their incomes for housing, 71 percent of lower-income families lack affordable housing, compared with 9 percent of higher-income families.
- Households with children in the lowest income quartile that spend more than 50 percent of income on housing have, on average, just \$257 per month for food, \$29 for clothing and \$9 for health care.

Costs and Cost Savings

Poor housing conditions and associated health problems take an economic toll on the nation:

- In 2004, the cost of preventable hospitalizations for asthma was \$1.4 billion.
- Each year, injuries occurring at home result in an estimated 4 million emergency department visits and 70,000 hospital admissions.

Evidence suggests that safe and healthy housing policy can achieve savings:

- Preventing lead exposure among children can improve their intelligence and behavior, resulting in increased earning potential and lower health care costs. These in turn result in economic benefits ranging from \$110 to \$319 billion dollars annually.
- Targeted home-based environmental interventions for asthma can reduce the number of unscheduled medical visits, symptom days, and beta-agonist inhalers for inner-city children at the cost of less than \$28 per symptom-free day gained.

More Resources

Visit commissiononhealth.org for more information, including *Beyond Health Care: New Directions to a Healthier America* – the Commission's full report, an annotated version of this fact sheet (with citations), model programs, key organizations, charts and figures, websites, issue briefs and reports.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America – a national, independent, non-partisan group of leaders – investigated why Americans aren't as healthy as they could be. Recognizing that there's more to health than health care, the Commission looked outside the medical care system for ways to improve health. The Commission's 10 recommendations are rooted in the twin philosophy that good health requires individuals to make responsible personal choices and society to remove the obstacles blocking too many Americans from making healthy choices. Learn more at commissiononhealth.org.