

Bringing Americans together on the issue of affordable housing

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A lack of affordable housing is linked with many health problems, including asthma, stress and alcoholism. Penn State researchers found that while some Americans may be less aware of this link, there may be ways to communicate this connection in a way that resonates with those groups.

The researchers found that high-income citizens and conservatives were less likely to acknowledge the link between [housing affordability](#) and [health](#) than people in lower income brackets or other political affiliations. These groups were also more responsive to the themes of "personal responsibility" and "stability and security."

Selena Ortiz, assistant professor of health policy and administration, said she hopes these insights—recently published in the journal *SSM—Population Health*—can help improve communications about health and [housing](#) affordability.

"If there's a way we can use those themes and incorporate them into communications, maybe our message can resonate with those groups more," Ortiz said. "If we can talk about improving housing affordability in terms of allowing someone to secure a healthy, stable life, while also not discounting this theme of personal responsibility, maybe that could help."

Ortiz says that while the term "affordable housing crisis" makes it sound like this is a new problem, the issue has been around for decades. She

said that currently, a worker making minimum wage is unable to spend less than 30 percent of their income on rent or a mortgage anywhere in the U.S. Additionally, an estimated 12 million American households pay more than 50 percent of their income on housing.

The researchers said that people living in unaffordable housing are at risk for many negative health outcomes, both physically and mentally. Unsafe living conditions could put them at risk for lead or asbestos poisoning, while also placing them at a higher risk for drug or alcohol abuse and stress from the threat of eviction.

"There's real consequences, including having to worry every single month about how are you going to scrape the money together to pay for your rent or mortgage," Ortiz said. "The fear and act of eviction is also pretty powerful. And with children who go through that, there could be effects that linger throughout their lives—which we just don't know about yet."

To investigate how Americans feel about the link between health and housing affordability, the researchers used data from 400 adults who were members of the Survey Sampling International online research panel, which is representative of the U.S. in terms of gender, age, race, income and educational levels.

The participants were asked questions about their income and political affiliation, along with whether they agreed that the cost and affordability of housing was related to a person's health. They also answered an open-ended question about how and why housing affordability matters.

After analyzing the data, the researchers found that overall, most of the participants agreed that housing affordability was linked to health. About 83 percent of Democrats, 65 percent of Independents and 61 percent of Republicans agreed with the connection. About 43 percent of

respondents in the highest income bracket agreed, contrasted with 70 percent in the lower income groups.

Ortiz said that while the participants largely agreed to the first question of whether housing affordability matters to health, when asked an open-ended question about why housing affordability matters, health rarely came up.

"Even in this short survey, the concept of health wasn't very salient," Ortiz said. "It just goes to show that we need to be very explicit and very forthcoming in our messaging about this link again and again and again, because it doesn't stick in our minds."

The groups that were less likely to agree that housing affordability was linked with health were also more likely to talk about "personal responsibility" and "security and stability" when asked why housing [affordability](#) matters.

"If we know these groups value these themes, maybe we can fold them into our communications in a way that doesn't discount these beliefs," Ortiz said. "Is there a way, for example, to not discount [personal responsibility](#) while also explaining that you can still have an individual that's working 40 hours plus and they still can't afford their home and provide for their family? How do we emphasize that affordable housing enables individuals to exercise their own agency to secure a better life for them and their families?"

Ortiz said she hopes her research can help bring Americans together to agree on housing policies that can make [affordable housing](#) a possibility for everyone.

"This isn't an issue of people not working hard enough," Ortiz said. "These are real families and individuals who are struggling, and it has

severe public health consequences, not just for them but for us as a society. We have to continue to talk about it and be creative about how we communicate about it."

More information: Selena E. Ortiz et al, Building the case for housing policy: Understanding public beliefs about housing affordability as a key social determinant of health, *SSM - Population Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ssmph.2018.08.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2018.08.008)

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