



## Housing strain, mortgage foreclosure, and health

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Foreclosure rates have risen rapidly since 2005, reaching historically high levels. The purpose of this study was to examine the health implications of the current housing crisis.

**Methods:** We conducted a cross-sectional online consumer panel survey including residents of California, Arizona, Nevada, and Florida (n = 798) to determine the feasibility of contacting distressed homeowners via the Internet and to assess mental and physical health among respondents across the spectrum from those having no housing strain to those in loan default or home foreclosure.

**Results:** Homeowners in default or foreclosure exhibited poorer mental health and more physical symptoms than renters, homeowners with moderate strain, and homeowners with no strain following a gradient that was consistent across multiple health indicators.

**Conclusions:** Internet panel sampling was an efficient method of contacting distressed homeowners. Record-high foreclosure rates may have broad implications for nursing and public health. Homeowners in default or foreclosure represent an identifiable high-risk group that may benefit from coordinated, affordable health and social services.

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## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The unprecedented volume of mortgage defaults and foreclosures represents an important and under-recognized population health issue.
- Distressed homeowners are more likely than secure homeowners and renters to have impaired mental and physical health.
- Health care access may be limited for distressed homeowners. In addition to financial counseling and social services, distressed homeowners may benefit from screening and referral to appropriate, affordable health services. Bundling of services at one site of intervention, like foreclosure courts or housing counseling agencies, may aid this vulnerable population.
- Distressed homeowners whose health is impaired may face particular challenges as they attempt to improve their financial situations. Medical care and appropriate counseling may be necessary to enable distressed homeowners to seek, obtain, and sustain employment.
- Nurses are well suited to provide screening, counseling, care, and referrals for distressed homeowners whose health is impaired.
- Nurses can serve as important advocates for health-relevant policy responses to the housing crisis.

## Introduction

After a dramatic increase in subprime lending beginning in 2003,<sup>1</sup> foreclosure rates increased rapidly through 2008, sending 1.84% of all homes in the United States—more than 2.3 million properties—into some stage of foreclosure during that year.<sup>2</sup> A recent forecast by Credit Suisse predicted that 8.1 million mortgages (16% of all mortgages) will be in foreclosure by 2012.<sup>3</sup>

Considerable evidence suggests that health and wealth are tightly connected, and that financial strain is associated with poor health, but few studies have examined mortgage default or foreclosure, especially in the context of the current US housing crisis.<sup>4-6</sup> Economic stresses such as job loss are associated with health declines and increases in depressive symptoms.<sup>7-10</sup> Debt and self-reported financial strain are also associated with worse health,<sup>11-13</sup> and difficulty making mortgage payments is associated with lower general well-being.<sup>14,15</sup> One recent study demonstrated high rates of uninsurance, major depression, and unfilled prescription medications in Philadelphia-area residents undergoing mortgage foreclosure.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, wealth is positively associated with health, and the largest source of wealth for

American families is home equity.<sup>16</sup> Home ownership has been associated with greater life satisfaction, better psychological health, higher self-esteem and perceived control, and better self-rated health.<sup>17</sup> Thus, people undergoing mortgage foreclosure may be more likely to experience poor health.

We address the health implications of the current economic crisis by asking the question: What is the health status of Americans facing foreclosure? We expected this group would exhibit the highest prevalence of poor health of any housing group studied. To date, few studies have demonstrated the interplay between the housing crisis and well-being to inform appropriate interventions.<sup>18</sup> In the discussion section, we examine how the results of this study may guide nursing, public health, and community practice and inform policies to assist homeowners in default or foreclosure. These distressed homeowners may benefit from coordinated financial assistance and targeted social and health services. This article first presents empirical data on the health status of distressed homeowners and then explores potential community-based strategies for reaching out to this vulnerable population.

## Methods

### Study Design and Sample

This cross-sectional study relied on 2 sources of data: (1) analysis of foreclosure Internet discussion board posts to identify categories of distressed homeowners' perceived health and social concerns and inform survey development, and (2) collection of survey data from an online consumer panel to examine whether these health issues were differentially reported by distressed homeowners compared with secure homeowners and renters.

### Analysis of Discussion Board Posts and Survey Development

Between January 1 and April 30, 2008, we reviewed all online posts to a foreclosure-related Internet discussion forum that enrolled several thousand individuals experiencing housing strain. From those posts in the general "Tell us your story" category, we extracted and evaluated every comment related to individual and family health or well-being. The posts were classified as: general health; mental health (anxiety, depression); foregone health care (medication, physician and dentist visits, eye care, dropped insurance); and health behavior (drinking, smoking, exercise, food/diet, weight loss/gain, sleep impairment). We also evaluated the reasons participants cited for being in default or foreclosure, including the following: health-related expenses, divorce, job loss, death of a family member, interest rate of loan, predatory lending,

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