

COVID-19 Relief Programs and Homelessness: Exploring Systemic Patterns of Inaccessibility

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted the day-to-day lives of most Americans, but one particular group of Americans that has received little attention during this time is the homeless population. Although much research exists about homelessness and about COVID-19, there is currently little understanding of how these two factors interact. Thus, I spoke with 60 homeless people selected by convenience sample from a local food bank in the California Bay Area, asking them a series of questions about their lives before and after the pandemic. Initially, I set out to quantitatively measure adherence to COVID-19 protocols via a simple survey research design. However, I discovered that, while most of the homeless population was vaccinated and observing COVID-19 protocols – as apparent by an overwhelming 90% vaccination rate and over 83% affirming the importance of mask-wearing – their health issues were more directly attributable to pandemic-related delays and challenges in their local communities of care. These findings inspired a methodological pivot to a qualitative, semi-structured interview research design. With these interviews, I discovered that inadequacies in education about – or simply access to – technology often prevented these homeless people from actually utilizing their increased local support. For example, shower trucks in the area were difficult to access without a phone equalized with the locator app. Additionally, to receive such a phone, individuals were required to provide forms of identification inaccessible without the help of other technology. These prerequisite structures and presumptions created a frustrating loop of inaccessibility, where resources were technically present in abundance but functionally unusable. Taken together, these results indicate that the public health focus on COVID-19 prevention and treatment may be inappropriate for improving quality of life for the homeless due to a lack of holistic understanding of their daily complications. Instead, communities of care such as shelters, food banks, and service agencies should direct their efforts toward providing long-term sustainability rather than short term – and potentially technologically inaccessible – solutions.

Keywords: COVID-19, homelessness, communities of care

Themes: health service management, health communication and health information technology, social determinants of health

Biography

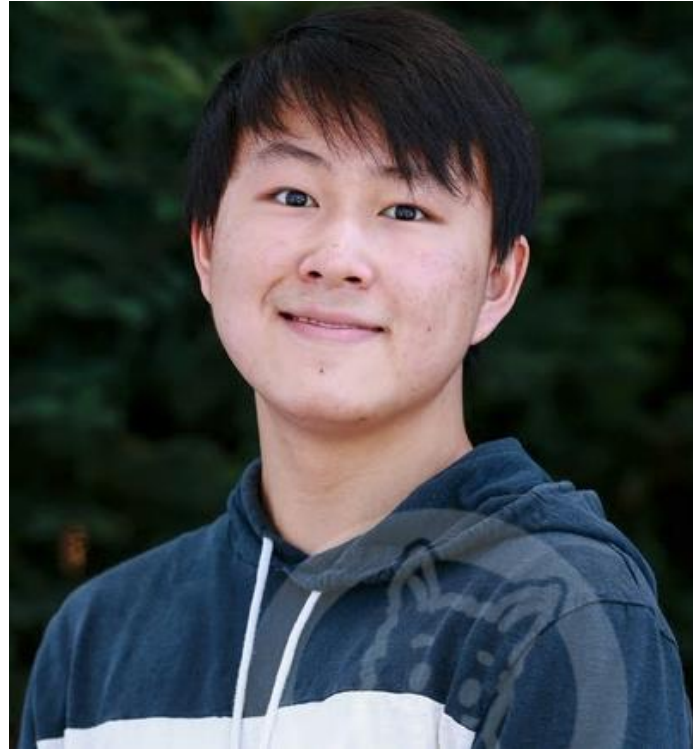
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Andrew is a high school student participating in the prestigious Polygence Research Academy mentorship program. Andrew collaborated with health communication advisor Ian Stark to develop and formalize a research project examining the homelessness epidemic in their local community. In the future, Andrew aspires to become a medical professional.

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