Access to COVID-19 Information in the Unhoused Population
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INTRODUCTION

As of 2019, there were 557,715 Americans without housing, and California reported the largest unhoused population in the country. 1 In the past 2 years, the rate of unhoused people in California has risen 16%, which is the second highest in the country. 1 Many reports have shown that the unhoused population is particularly vulnerable to infectious disease epidemics and pandemics due to lack of control of their surroundings, disproportionate resource allocation, and broken communication. 2 While there have been many initiatives started to try and combat these inequities, there is little research about communication and the dissemination of information to the unhoused population. 3 As the guidelines for COVID-19 are constantly changing, there is a need for a better system of communication within this vulnerable population to ensure that they receive timely, accurate updates to help reduce their risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19.

OBJECTIVES

• Identify where the unhoused population obtains COVID-19 information
• Identify what information sources the unhoused population perceives as trustworthy

METHODS

Students of the Med Encampment Project identified a sample of 200 unhoused individuals, including those in encampments and temporary hotel placements, and administered a 20-minute survey that included information on demographics, social history, and their use and access of various resources. A third of individuals surveyed also completed a 30-60-minute structured interview on their experience with COVID-19 and how the pandemic has impacted their life. The two interview questions that we chose to review were:

"How did you first hear about COVID-19?" 1
"Who do you trust to provide information about COVID-19?" 2

We reviewed the 65 transcribed interviews and categorized their responses into generalizable categories including: News, medical personnel, family/Friends/word of mouth, etc. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

OBJECTIVES

RESULTS

Figure 1: Demographics of Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24-68</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: How did you first hear about COVID-19?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>NH White</th>
<th>NH Black</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Native American</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Veteran Status</th>
<th>Did not answer</th>
<th>Medical Personnel</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Everybody</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WH</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Who do you trust to provide information about COVID-19?

When asked about who they trust to provide them with information, 25% said medical personnel, 23% said the news, 17% said no one, 8% said family, and 22% did not answer. Interestingly, when looking at those who cited the news as their primary source of information, only 50% also stated that they trust the news. Whereas in those who stated their primary source as medical professionals, 73% also stated that they trust medical professionals to provide information about COVID-19.

CONCLUSIONS

• Unhoused individuals are a vulnerable population during the pandemic, given that they often cannot effectively quarantine. Our population reported an average of 7 daily contacts. Therefore, for their personal safety, access to updated pandemic information is of the utmost importance.
• Of those living in the encampments, only a third reported access to electricity. This affects the routes of information people are able to use, with a significant portion of our population utilizing their social circle and word of mouth as their primary source. This can also delay information dissemination. For an example several of our interviewees stated that they only found out about COVID-19 when local stores and restaurants began to close down.
• Because access to a news source is variable, it is important to find other, more reliable means of communication to disseminate updated COVID-19 information.
• Medical professionals are a trusted source of information and there is a need for a greater presence with those living in encampments.

REFERENCES

PMCID: PMC2352410

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