COVID-19’s Impact on People Experiencing Homelessness

- People experiencing homelessness have been disproportionately affected by the novel COVID-19 pandemic.
  - According to a study of Boston Medical Center patients, people experiencing homelessness made up 16% of COVID-19 patients and 15% of deaths, despite making up less than 1% of the population. [1]
- The dangerous conditions that come with living on the streets intensify medical issues. [2]
  - Not only are many people experiencing homelessness older in age, but living on the streets causes people to age faster. [3]
  - Preexisting conditions that exacerbate the effects of COVID-19, such as hypertension, diabetes, cardiac disease, and chronic respiratory disease, are rampant amongst those experiencing homelessness. [4]
  - Failing to end homelessness is costly as illnesses associated with homelessness cost $18,500 per person in yearly emergency room visits. [5]
- Shelters are unsafe as they are densely populated and feature communal facilities, making them hotbeds for coronavirus outbreaks. [6]
  - In New York City shelters alone, 88 people died from COVID-19 as of June 22nd—resulting in a death rate 61% higher than that of the rest of the city. [7]
- As evictions rise amidst record unemployment rates and high rent costs, risk of homelessness increases.
  - Already as of June, homelessness in Los Angeles has risen nearly 13% from 2019. [8]
- Minorities make up a disproportionate amount of people experiencing homelessness, are predisposed to diseases that exacerbate the effects of COVID-19, such as asthma and autoimmune diseases, and have greater difficulty accessing healthcare than the rest of the population. [9]
  - As of 2015, 15% of Black adults and 25% of Latinx adults were uninsured. [10]
  - Black people in Chicago, IL encompassed 60% of the city’s COVID-19 deaths, despite making up less than a third of the population. [11]
  - In New York City, Latinx and Black people have been dying at rates twice as high as that of white and Asian people. [12]

“It feels like I have my own spot again . . . I think I will be a better person after I get out of here . . . I am very hopeful and grateful now.”
– James Shields, Person Experiencing Homelessness on Being Allowed to Stay in New York City Hotels
**Beneficial Responses to COVID-19**

- At the federal level, the CARES Act allocated $1 billion of Emergency Solutions Grants to local governments to help people experiencing homelessness and those at risk of losing their shelter. [13]
- On September 1st, the CDC issued an order enacting another moratorium on evictions through the rest of the year. [14]
  - However, residents must meet certain criteria set out by the order, which can be disputed by a landlord and ultimately decided by a judge. [15]
- San Jose, CA was one of the first cities in the nation to place a moratorium on sweeps of homeless encampments, enabling individuals to safely sleep in private tents during the pandemic. [16]
- Los Angeles Council member Mike Bonin has provided informal settlements in his district with running water, clean toilets, and hand washing stations to enable hygiene to prevent infection. [17]
- Cities like Los Angeles, CA and Portland, OR have temporarily halted or reduced vehicle ticketing, towing, and impoundment providing an option for shelter for people without housing. [18]
- Some municipalities, like Los Angeles, CA and Miami, FL, are providing access to COVID testing to homeless communities. [19]
- In response to calls from advocates, some municipalities have allowed portions of the homeless population to stay in empty facilities, such as hotels, motels, and dorms.
  - In New York, now almost 20% of hotels in the city are housing 13,000 single homeless adults who had been staying in shelters. [20]
  - The California Department of Social Services launched Project Roomkey, a program that provides shelter in hotels and motels to people experiencing homelessness that are at high-risk of hospitalization from COVID-19, which now has 4,072 individuals in 3,563 hotel rooms across the state. [21]

**Harmful Responses to COVID-19**

- Municipalities across the country have been violating CDC guidelines and displacing people in informal settlements, placing them in greater danger.
  - The NYPD has been clearing out people residing in the city's subway system, resulting in 90% of the 2,000 individuals now sleeping on the streets to sleep in busses, as they fear going to shelters. [22]
  - Despite calls to refrain from making unnecessary arrests, between March and April one in three people experiencing homelessness were arrested in Miami-Dade, resulting in over 300 people going to jails where the virus was already spreading rapidly. [23]
  - The Los Angeles City Council has ousted those sheltering outside by voting in July to resume major cleanups around “bridge housing” shelters in order to prevent “buildups of items and trash.” [24]

**Recommendations**

- Provide housing for people experiencing homelessness in hotels, motels, and/or RVs for the remainder of the pandemic, with plans to transition them into permanent housing rather than making them return to the streets.
- Stop sweeps and ensure that cleanups do not result in the displacement of residents or destruction of their property.
- Increase access to hygienic and sanitation material for those living in informal settlements, as well as ensure access to basic medical services and vaccines as these become available.
- Place a moratorium on vehicle ticketing, towing, and impounding.
- Provide sufficient testing in homeless communities and collect data based on housing status, as well as race, gender, and other characteristics for testing, hospitalization, and death rates.
- Stop the rise of homelessness by pausing all eviction and foreclosure proceedings, place a moratorium on evictions, and remove late fees on tardy rental or mortgage payments throughout the pandemic.
- Ensure that emergency funds to help those experiencing homelessness during the pandemic are available and accessible.
- All levels of government should recognize the right to adequate housing. This entails protection against forced eviction and the availability of housing that is affordable, habitable, accessible, well-located, and culturally adequate.


