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Blog 6

Elizabeth Bowen and Nicole Capozziello, A Human Rights Perspective on Homelessness and COVID-19



Blog Authors: Elizabeth Bowen, PhD, and Nicole Capozziello, MSW. This blog represents the personal reflections of the author.

Introduction: In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, experts warned of the unique and devastating havoc that the novel illness could wreak on people experiencing homelessness, an already vulnerable population. While reports thus far suggest that neither the prevalence nor mortality of COVID-19 among people who are homeless has been as severe as feared, the pandemic has brought about opportunities to enact innovative and long overdue approaches to the issue of homelessness. Though there are compelling public health reasons for providing housing assistance and related services, we believe that there is more enduring value in reframing homelessness from a human rights perspective, ensuring housing to every American during the pandemic and beyond.

A Human Rights Perspective on Homelessness and COVID-19

Blog Authors: [Elizabeth Bowen, PhD](#) and Nicole Capozziello, MSW. This blog represents the personal reflections of the authors.

Keywords: Human Rights, Pandemic, Homelessness, Health, Public Health, Housing, Incarceration, Activism, Advocacy, Community, Equality, Equity, Benefits, Discrimination, Inequality, Economic Hardship, Covid-19

Introduction: In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, experts warned of the unique and devastating havoc that the novel illness could wreak on people experiencing homelessness, an already vulnerable population. While [reports thus far](#) suggest that neither the prevalence nor mortality of COVID-19 among people who are homeless has been as severe as feared, the pandemic has brought about opportunities to enact innovative and long overdue approaches to the issue of homelessness. Though there are compelling public health reasons for providing housing assistance and related services, we believe that there is more enduring value in reframing homelessness from a human rights perspective, ensuring housing to every American during the pandemic and beyond.

The concern. What factors make people experiencing homelessness particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 and its consequences? Among other reasons, homeless people have high rates of co-occurring health problems and generally poor health, and their living conditions are not conducive to quarantining or social distancing. These living circumstances include people who stay outdoors or in other places not intended for habitation, as well as people staying in shelters and those who couch-surf or “double up” with friends or family. Other factors have received less attention, such as the [homeless-incarceration cycle](#) as a cause of COVID-19 transmission risk. Formerly incarcerated people are almost [10](#) times as likely to be homeless than the general public, with some experiencing homelessness both prior to and following incarceration. Another aspect to consider is how shutdowns and other changes related to the pandemic have affected homeless people’s survival and ability to access services. Take, for example, public libraries: with many libraries closed or operating on reduced hours during the pandemic, homeless people have fewer safe places to go for both temporary shelter and to access information.

The public health rationale. One can readily make a public health argument for helping people obtain housing as quickly as possible during a pandemic. Getting people housed in non-congregate setting helps protect individuals from COVID-19, and also reduces transmission risk for the larger communities within which unhoused people live and interact. Leaders in California used such reasoning in developing the [Project Roomkey](#) program, a statewide effort to help people experiencing homelessness obtain housing in hotel rooms, alongside other services. It should be noted, however, that this public health rationale developed well before the COVID-19 pandemic. Stakeholders ranging from housing advocates to [managed care plans](#) have long argued that “housing is healthcare.” Essentially, housing people not only leads to improved health, but also savings in the healthcare system overall.

A human rights approach. Although the public health rationale for housing assistance has generated critical and laudable efforts to reduce homelessness, the continuing pervasiveness of homelessness in the United States, despite decades of research on homelessness and health, suggests that other

rationales and strategies are also needed. The spotlight on homelessness in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportune time to restate that, per the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), **housing is a human right**. However, in the United States, housing is not considered an entitlement benefit, meaning that people in need can end up on wait lists or be denied benefits when funding for a housing assistance program runs out. As such, the [Urban Institute](#) estimates that only one in five U.S. households that is eligible for federal rental assistance actually receives it. One of the most critical things that the U.S. could do to protect housing as a human right would be to make housing assistance for low-income individuals and families an entitlement benefit, similar to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Medicaid. This would ensure that all people who meet the eligibility criteria are entitled to receive the benefit. Just in 2019, [Canada ensured that housing is indeed a human right](#), and codified it into law.

Homelessness will remain a problem well beyond the crisis of COVID-19. In fact, there is reason to fear that the economic hardships brought on by the pandemic will exacerbate homelessness, which has already been on the rise since 2016. Although making housing assistance an entitlement is not an easy policy change, it would be among the most powerful things the U.S. federal government could do to protect public health as well as recognize housing as a human right for all people.